

The Power Of Basics

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Part 1: The Power Of Basics

1-1 The Importance Of Truth

There are a number of serious problems in our spiritual experience which will exercise all thoughtful believers:

- We realize that for all that we ourselves know, we often behave in a way totally inappropriate to the wonderful doctrinal knowledge which we have
- We may convince a person of the truth of our position about, e.g., the trinity, but they can respond: " And, so what...?" Why does it matter what we believe? Does Biblical interpretation matter very much at all? What is the importance of truth?
- Grace and peace are multiplied to us through the [true] knowledge of the Father and Son (2 Pet. 1:2). There are times in our own lives, and in part throughout the life of our community, where this doesn't seem to be happening. The link between peace and true knowledge isn't apparent.

I believe that the resolution to these issues is to understand that our way of life is a direct outcome of our doctrinal beliefs, and that therefore it does matter, crucially, what we believe. The problems and disappointments which we face in our private and collective lives arise from a lack of appreciation of how doctrine directly affects our practice, if we *truly* believe it.

Faith and " The Faith"

Trust or faith in God comes from not trusting upon human understanding, but upon the understanding [s.w. meaning, knowledge, wisdom] that is God's (Prov. 3:5). In this lies the importance of truth in Biblical interpretation. So understanding, correctly perceiving meaning, true wisdom...are related to having a real faith. The Proverbs go on to plead for correct understanding, because this will be the source of a Godly life of faith in practice. There is therefore a connection between " faith" in the sense of belief, and the fact the essential doctrines of Christianity are called " *the* faith" ; the noun " the Faith" and the verb 'to believe / have faith' are related. This is because a true understanding of the one Faith will inevitably lead to true faith, and therefore works; for faith and works are inseparable. This relationship is brought out in Acts 3:16: " His name, through faith in his name, hath made this man strong...yea, the faith which is in Him (Christ) hath given him (the healed man) this perfect soundness" . Being unsound in the Faith is another way of saying that in works a man is denying Christ; to be " sound in the faith" is to tell the truth and not be lazy nor gluttonous (Tit. 1:13,16). Good behaviour " adorns the doctrine of God" , i.e. the basic doctrines of the Gospel (Tit. 2:10); the practical commandments of Tit. 2:2-10 are " the things which befit the sound doctrine" (Tit. 2:1 RV) which Titus was to teach. It's almost as if Paul is telling Titus to bring out the practical implications of the doctrines which he was teaching.

Keeping the commandments and having the Faith in Christ are paralleled in Rev. 14:12. To have the commandments is to keep them (Jn. 14:21 Gk.)- a true understanding leads to obedience in practice. " The faith in Christ" (cp. Acts 24:24) was what was responsible for the man's faith and therefore his healing. But that faith involved an understanding of doctrine; it wasn't just a feeling of trust. Thus the Lord commended the Canaanite woman for her

understanding of the Hope of Israel and the Gentile's place in it: " Great is thy faith" (Mt. 15:28); great was her understanding, and therefore her faith. It would appear that in John's Gospel, the verbs for 'to know' and 'to believe' are interchangeable (e.g. Jn. 17:8). Knowledge in its true and proper sense leads to faith. Therefore the importance of truth becomes paramount. Jn. 10:38 in the AV has Jesus beseeching men to " know and *believe*" , whereas the RV has " know and *understand*" . Likewise the *faith* of the sick woman is commended by the Lord (Mk. 5:34; Mt. 9:20)- when it was due to her *understanding* of the significance of the *hem* of the Lord's robe that she had touched Him. She had perceived the connection with the High Priest's hem; perhaps too she had added Job's comment about our touching but the hem of God's garment into the equation. And certainly she perceived that the sun of righteousness of Mal. 4 had healing in his hems / wings of his garment. Remember that it was due to His *knowing* that the Lord gave His life (Jn. 10:15). Knowledge, in its active and true sense, does have a vital part to play. Otherwise spirituality becomes pure emotion alone. To " follow after righteousness" is paralleled with " to know righteousness" (Is. 51:1,7). To know it properly is to follow after it. The disciples were rebuked as being " of little faith" in the matter of not *understanding* the Lord's teaching about leaven (Mt. 16:8-11). It has been commented that the sayings of Jesus " are everywhere too subtly penetrated with theological claims and dogmatical instruction for the distinction commonly drawn between Christian " ethics" and Christian " dogma" to be other than forced or artificial" . His doctrines lead to His practice. Doctrine is likened by the Lord to yeast- it is going to affect the holder of it (Mt. 16:11,12).

There is likewise an intended ambiguity in the phrase " the faith of Abraham" (Rom. 4:16); this 'ambiguous genitive' can mean those who share " the (doctrinal) faith" , which Abraham also believed; or those who have the kind of belief which Abraham had. Like Abraham, we are justified by *the* faith in Christ; not faith in Christ, but more specifically *the* faith in Christ (Gal. 2:16). The use of the definite article surely suggests that it is our possession of the same doctrinal truths (the Faith) which Abraham had, which is what leads to faith in Christ and thereby our justification. The *life* Paul lived was by *the* Faith of Christ; not simply by faith, as a verb, which is how grammatically it should be expressed if this is what was meant; but by *the* Faith (Gal. 2:20).

The Power Of Truth

Truth of itself changes us. Hence the importance of truth. We must grasp the reality of the fact that either what we believe and stand for is indeed " the truth" , or a very carefully fabricated pack of philosophy, commended to us by many experiences of auto-suggestion and complex psychological tricks we are playing upon ourselves. For me, and I suspect for you, the awesome conclusion is that no, this *is* the truth. The real thing. Daniel speaks of repentance and obeying God's voice as being a result of 'having discernment in thy truth' (Dan. 9:13,14 RV). To grasp the endless depth and height of the fact we are in touch with ultimate truth inevitably affects our lives. 3 Jn. 3 in the AV speaks of " the truth that is in thee" ; but the Greek can also mean, as in the RV, " thy truth" . To really believe true doctrine leads to repentance, and to our being truthful at the very least. Our contact with God's truth results in our being truthful not only to others but to ourselves, and this, as Daniel observed, gives rise to true repentance.

We must be careful not to separate doctrine from practice. Our concern for truth and for the importance of truth must always remain with us, but truth sets free, not enslaves us to forms of words and the inevitable division which such slavery will bring. Doctrines lead to faith,

but faith is not total certainty we know everything; faith is essentially trust, trust in those things we do not and cannot know in the ultimate sense. It is the basic Gospel itself which has the power to bring forth the new man, after the image of Christ. It is crucial to what I would call 'true theology' [defence of first principles, upholding the Truth, call it what you will] that it is not separated from the call of doctrine to be the vital force for the transformation of human life. We must be careful not to develop (either in our ecclesias or in our own minds) a complex intellectual theological system that lacks a praxis. That praxis, I submit, is in the preaching of the Gospel to the world. Out there, there is plenty of praxis, striving to find an adequate theological / doctrinal underpinning. We must realize that the true theologian, the real believer in the Truth, cannot avoid the challenge of knowing personally life in its most traumatic forms. It has been truly observed: "theology cannot but have a mission". Unless 'theology', doctrine, defence of it etc., are put at the service of our mission, to save men and women and glorify the Lord, then there can only be an ever increasing gap between the theory and practice in our lives. I fear that we have come to worship a theology, rather than the living and real persons of the Father and Son to whom that theology should lead. We have come to love and concern ourselves with the doctrines which comprise our theology, *and we tend to leave it there*. And thus that theology has of itself become empty, and sooner or later thoughtful folk start asking 'What ever are we spending our lives worrying about? Let's quit this for something more practical!'. When paradoxically enough, it is the actual doctrines which comprise the theology, or at least, the correct theology, which ought to be transforming lives in practice.

It is worth observing the very simple fact that the New Testament is essentially a missionary document- all the expressions and articulations of doctrine / theology found there are all in the context of the preaching of the Gospel and the immediate problems of men and women in responding to it. This is why we aren't given a cold statement of faith or catechism in the New Testament, but rather the history of the mission of Christ at its first beginning. Even parables like that of Mt. 25:31-46 were relevant in a missionary context- regarding the perils of not supporting the itinerant missionaries in the first century. And this is why the power of the early Christian witness lay in who they were- for this was the real advertisement for the doctrine they preached. The importance of truth was reflected in how their personalities and characters differed from those around them. There should be no disconnection between the message we preach and ordinary life. Life, our actual existence, should be at the heart of the doctrinal message we preach. It is not *only* a message of future things- that message must touch and reach deeply into life at home, work, family, and into the unshareable self of the human psyche. Our belief in any statement of faith should be just that- a statement of our living faith, rather than a mere statement of our intellectual, academic, theoretical opinion. Our lives and personalities above all are our individual statement of faith. The doctrine of the cross, of the Gospel, of the man and Lord Christ Jesus, is to be the centre of not merely our mind and reason, but at the core of our actual life and conscience. For we become like what we believe in- if we believe in the light, we become children of light (Jn. 12:36).

1-2 Doctrine And Practice Are Linked

Jonah 2:9 contains the enigmatic statement that those who "hold to empty faiths" (Heb.) "forsake their own *hesed*". *Hesed* basically refers to the capacity a superior has to show mercy, grace and love to someone in an inferior position. For over 20 years I wondered what Jonah was really getting at. I think I then grasped it- those who hold to empty faiths forego the capacity to show *hesed*, favour to others- the implication being that the result of the one *true* faith is that we are empowered to show *hesed*, love, favour, grace, mercy, to others. And

this ties in perfectly with 1 Pet. 1:22- we obey the truth *unto*, with the result that, we show "unfeigned love of the brethren". This is how and where true doctrine comes to its ultimate term- love of others. Karl Barth put it powerfully: "The best theology would need no advocates: it would prove itself". If each doctrine of the Gospel had its intended outworking in our lives, there would be no need for the explanation of Gospel doctrine; the doctrines would be lived out in our personalities. Perhaps this was why there was so little 'theology', propositional truths or academic doctrine, on the lips of the Lord Jesus. For He was the word of the Gospel made flesh. To quote Barth again: "Jesus does not give recipes that show the way to God as other teachers of religion do. He is Himself the way".

It has been observed that "biography... is characteristic of Paul's correspondence". All the time he makes reference to himself; not in an egotistical way, but because he knew that doctrine and practice were linked, and therefore he understood himself as modeling his own theology. The structure of Paul's letters shows very clearly the link between doctrine and practice. Colossians 1 and 2 are pure theology, the precise, analytical Paul at his most flowing, intellectually devastating and persuasive; but " *then...*" (3:1) we are lead on to another two chapters of the practical implications of this. This theology / doctrinal treatise and the pivotal, crucial *then... therefore...* is likewise the turning point of Romans (12:1), Galatians (6:1-10), Ephesians (4:1) and Philippians (4:1). His theology, his doctrine, always ends in an ethical demand (see too 1 Thess. 5 and 2 Thess. 3). To use pompous words, our orthodoxy (right doctrine) must lead to orthopraxy (right behaviour). We can resist the devil " in the faith" - in that the doctrines of the Gospel, if allowed to act upon us, empower us to overcome all forms of temptation (1 Pet. 5:9). We all have a tendency to " drift away" from " the things which we have heard [in the preaching of the Gospel to us]" (Heb. 2:1 RV). And yet it is quite possible that someone schooled in true doctrine will never forget those doctrines, even if they live a worldly life. We drift away from the doctrines in the sense that we cease to let them influence our lives. This is why we constantly need to undertake a study such as this- to remind ourselves of how basic doctrine elicits a response in practical life. The 'false teachers' of New Testament times weren't simply misunderstanding the Bible, making innocent theological errors- they were (according to the context of the passages which speak about them) advocating on this basis a wrong way of life. This theme of false teaching being associated with false behaviour is to be found in the Old Testament- for the false prophets in Jeremiah's time were condemned for how they were sexually immoral, not just for incorrect theology (Jer. 29:23).

The Psychology Of Intellectual Failure

Again, the inextricable link between doctrine and practice is brought out by the Lord in Jn. 7:17: "If any man willeth to *do* his will, he shall know of the doctrine...". My expanded paraphrase of this would be: 'If you want to do right before God in practice, then you will discern between right and wrong doctrine, because true doctrine leads to true practice. If you really want to be *doing* the right thing, then God will lead you to true doctrine'. And not long afterwards, the Lord hammers home His point: "Why do ye not understand my speech [teaching]? Even because ye cannot hear [i.e. accept] my word" (Jn. 8:43). Intellectual failure to understand the teaching of Jesus is rooted in a resistance to having our lives disturbed in a moral sense. How many have started studying true doctrine, only to draw back, perhaps unconsciously even, because they sense that this stuff is life-changing, and altogether too demanding for them to handle in practice? That refusing to believe or understand truth has a moral basis is brought out by the Lord's comment in Jn. 8:46: "If I say the truth, why do you not believe me?". He surely implies that it's not hard in itself to believe and accept His words

as true- but He explains that the Jews didn't believe because they preferred to believe the words of the "devil". The "devil" speaks his own language (Jn. 8:44 NIV), the Lord says, and the Jews preferred to hear *that* language because it was actually their own language. They did not "understand my word" because they preferred to do 'their own lusts' (Jn. 8:43). Those 'lusts' are paralleled with the language of the devil- which is exactly what 'the devil' refers to in so many Biblical contexts. The point of all this is that misunderstanding God's word is because we prefer to hear the language of our own self talk, our own lusts, the Biblical 'devil'. "The lusts of the [devil] it is your will to do", the Lord commented (Jn. 8:44 RV). This was their "language", and therefore any other language which was not of their own self talk was 'foreign' to them. And in this we have the essential basis for why people misunderstand the Lord's words today.

The Ongoing Gospel

Paul went to Rome to preach the Gospel to those who already believed (Rom. 1). It wasn't that he was going to reconvert them; it surely means that the Gospel, in the sense of the basic doctrines, was the basis upon which he sought to upbuild and inspire the new converts- for doctrine and practice are linked. And his letter to the Romans is a great example of practical exhortation built upon basic doctrine. This also explains why he can speak of having preached the Gospel at Jerusalem (Rom. 15:19), even though there is no record of this. He may well be referring to the way he 'preached' to the Jerusalem believers on the basis of basic doctrine. The doctrines we believed at baptism were a 'mould of doctrine' (Rom. 6:17 Gk.)- they define the person we turn into. The calling of the Gospel is ongoing- it's not that we hear the call, respond to it, and the call in that sense ceases. 1 Thess. 2:12,13 speaks of how God is constantly calling us to the Kingdom through the word of the Gospel, and therefore that word dynamically works in us who believe. The basic Gospel of the Kingdom works in us throughout our lives, calling us daily, beckoning us onwards to the Kingdom.

The Gospel demands a response. The Greek word *euangelia* actually implies this, although the English translation 'good news' may mask it. There is an inscription from Priene in Asia Minor which reads: " The birthday of the god [=Augustus] was for the world the beginning of *good news* [euangelia] owing to him" . The Gospel is not therefore just a proclamation of good news, e.g. an emperor's birthday. *Euangelia* meant the response to the good news; the good news and the response one must make to it are all bound up within the one word⁽¹⁾. " For the [Gospel of the] Kingdom of God is not [so much] in *word*, but in *power*" - the Gospel isn't so much words and ideas, as a life lived. For in the previous verse Paul has argued: " I will know, not the *word* of them which are puffed up, but the *power*" , i.e. what their lives show of the things they profess (1 Cor. 4:19,20 RV). And we must ask ourselves whether our personal Christianity is mere words, or the power of a life living out those words.

Doctrine And Commandment

Because doctrine and practice are linked, the Gospel is something to which man must be obedient (Acts 14:2 R.V.)- it isn't merely a set of academic propositions. It results in " the obedience of faith" . Probably the greatest temptation for all of us, in all stages of our spiritual career, is to be like Israel of old: to *know* the Faith, on an abstract, surface level, but not to really *believe* it in our hearts, and therefore not to act in the way God intends. Paul was aware of this difference; he spoke of us as those who believe *and* know the Truth (1 Tim. 4:3). Mt. 15:3-9 records how the Lord perceived that "Your tradition...the commandments of men...your doctrines" resulted in the hearts of Israel being "far from [God]". Doctrine was

intended to affect the heart; and false doctrine resulted in the heart being far from God. True doctrine, on the other hand, was and is intended to bring the heart close to God. Doctrine / teaching is therefore to affect the heart; it is not just the intellectual basis for unity in a community of believers. And the Lord goes on in this very context to talk of how “every plant which my heavenly Father hath not planted shall be rooted up” (Mt. 15:9). The Greek for “planted” is defined by Strong as meaning “Figuratively, to instil doctrine”. The planting of the believer is through the instillation of Godly doctrine, rather than the doctrines of men.

One of the Lord's pen pictures of the rejected included that of the man who thought that because he had preserved the talent (the basic doctrines of the Gospel) intact, therefore he was entitled to a place in the Kingdom. We are left to imagine him half-proudly, half sheepishly, holding it out to the Lord (Mt. 25:25). But he should have traded with his pounds (Lk. 19:13 RV)- done something with it all. The crowds hung upon Jesus' every word and teaching; it was so fascinating for them, so wonderful (Lk. 19:48 RV); and yet they still crucified Him. Those words, those wonderful ideas, didn't pierce deep within. " Doctrine" refers to a code of behaviour, not just a set of correct propositions concerning God and His plan with men. Thus we don't read about " *pure doctrine*" anywhere in the AV; but rather " *sound doctrine*" : living, active doctrine. The things which become sound doctrine are soberness, etc. (Tit. 2:1-4). Note how the Lord speaks of doctrine as a command in Mt. 15:6,9: " Thus have ye made the *commandment* of God of none effect by your tradition...in vain they do worship me, teaching for *doctrines* the commandments of men" . And He taught earlier that the doctrine of one God was in fact a command to action, as explained later. Doctrine, *didache*, is teaching, not just theory; it is commandment towards action. For doctrine and practice are linked. In this we are helped to assess whether any idea or interpretation is indeed a 'first principle doctrine' or not. What does it inspire in practice? Or is it merely the academic interpretation of the human brain cells? Paul taught the Thessalonians *after their baptism* " the Gospel of God...which effectually worketh also in you that (already) believe" (1 Thess. 2:9,13). That basic Gospel powerfully worked in them. The light of the Gospel is not just light which we behold and admire for its beauty; it is a light which by its very nature opens the eyes of blind people (Jn. 8:12)! It may be that those who have " a [the] form of Godliness" but deny its power (2 Tim. 3:5) are those who merely accept the propositions as outlined, e.g., in a statement of faith, but deny their living power in practice. And let us note that Paul lists this as an especial temptation of the last days. 2 Tim. 3:5-8 has some telling parallels:

Having a form of Godliness	denying [Gk. ‘contradicting’, ‘going against’, the power thereof
Ever learning [Gk. Studying]	but never acknowledging the truth [the ‘form of Godliness’]
Resisting the truth	

All this implies that there is a power in the “form of Godliness”, the basic “form” of doctrinal teaching delivered to baptism candidates. This power can be resisted in that lives remain unchanged; yet acknowledging the true implications of the Gospel will radically transform life. One can ‘hold the truth’ and study it academically, yet not acknowledge it’s power. Thus one can hold to a statement of faith and regularly study Scripture, and yet live the life outlined in 2 Tim. 3:1-3, of lying, deceit, boasting, dividing etc.- all because we do not

acknowledge the power of the demands of the doctrines which we study. Hence, there is an urgent need to discern and accept the practical, lifestyle demands of each of the doctrines which are fundamental to the Gospel. If we do not see the connection between doctrine and practice, if we don't perceive how doctrine and practice are linked, then the life of thought without action reduces our faith to mere intellectualism and endless theological debate, with all the resultant division this creates.

The Difference Between Hebrew And Greek Thinking

Many of us have a tendency to think of God in terms of a set of doctrinal propositions rather than as a living relationship. It seems to me that this is an outcome of a failure to recognize that the Bible is a Hebrew book, using language in a Hebrew way. Marvin Wilson comments: "Because the Hebrews liked the concrete and tended to avoid the abstract, the idea of doctrinal formulation was alien to their mind. In Hebrew thought the essence of true godliness is tied primarily to a relationship, not to a creed" (2). And in passing, this is useful window into the apparent problem of Bible paradoxes. Greek thinking involves 'step logic', whereby you reason in a series of logical extrapolations. But Hebrew tends to reason through placing 'blocks' of ideas are put in opposition to each other, or 'dialectic', in order to come to conclusions. That's why we can read of God hardening Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh hardening his own heart (Ex. 7:3; 8:15). To Greek, step-logic thinkers, that's a worrying contradiction- only because they don't pick up the way that Hebrew reasoning involves these kinds of statements being put in opposition to each other, so that through the dialectic process we come to understand what is meant. Summing up, our covenant relationship with God is a "living intercourse" as Abraham Heschel put it; it's not merely knowing a set of doctrines and information about the covenant promises, the terms of the covenant etc. In that case the covenant would be a tether or chain; but instead it is a relationship.

Notes

(1) This point is expanded upon in P.T. O'Brien, *Gospel And Mission In The Writings Of Paul* (Paternoster, 1995) p. 78.

(2) Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) p. 138.

1-3 The Power Of The Gospel

Appreciating the inter-relation between 'doctrine' and practice will result in our seeing through the fallacy that because someone's deeds are good, therefore it doesn't matter too much about their doctrine. The spiritual fruit which God seeks is that which is brought forth by the seed of His word, the Gospel. To *really* understand the basic Gospel with one's heart is to bring forth fruit, to be converted. True wisdom is justified by the works she brings forth (Mt. 11:19). This is why true conversion involves understanding and perceiving, and not merely hearing doctrinal truth (Mt. 13:15). True understanding is a seeking for God, a doing good; hence those who sin have no true knowledge as they ought to have, whatever their theoretical understanding (Ps. 14:2-4). But we can nominally believe the Gospel, 'understand' it in an intellectual sense, and bring forth no fruit to perfection (Mt. 13:15 cp. 23)- not perceiving the power of the Gospel. False prophets bring forth bad fruit; the nature of the teaching therefore affects the nature of the fruit (Mt. 7:16). False teaching [which isn't the

same as genuine intellectual failure] therefore elicits a bad way of life (2 Pet. 2:1,2); and the false prophets of the latter days will result in iniquity abounding (Mt. 24:11). This is why teaching does matter. Without faith- which comes from holding *the* Faith- it is impossible to please God. True righteousness is the fruit of the Spirit; the result of the word of the Gospel working within us, the result of the Spirit of Christ which God has sent forth into the hearts of His people. Many outside of the Faith appear to in fact be far more righteous than most of us, in terms of 'good works'. But these good works are an outcome of their natural personality type; this is how they *are*. But God has sent His Son to the sick who need a doctor, to those imprisoned by their own natures, to the tragically blind. Through the power of the basic Gospel doctrines which comprise the One Faith, we have the power to change.

The seed is the word (Lk. 8:11); and " the word" doesn't necessarily mean the whole Bible (although the whole Bible is of course inspired). The phrase specifically means the word of the power of the Gospel, by which we were ushered into spiritual being. And *this* is what brings forth fruit, through our 'patient' and continued response to it. We were born again, " not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God...and this is the word which by the Gospel is preached unto you" (1 Pet. 1:23,25). Time and again the New Testament uses " the word of God" or " the word of the Lord (Jesus)" as shorthand for the preaching of the basic Gospel. *This* is the seed, this is the source of new life, this is what can lead to new character and behaviour in us. James speaks of being " doers of the word" (1:22,25), using the same word as in the parable of the sower, there translated 'to bring forth fruit'. Note that " the word of God" in the NT often refers specifically to the Gospel. James foresaw the possibility of hearing the word of the Gospel but not doing it, not bringing forth what those basic doctrines imply. He foresees how we can admire it as a vain man seeing his reflection in a mirror. We are not to be " forgetful hearers" of the word of the basics, the " implanted word" (1:21 RV- another reference to the sower parable). We aren't to learn the Gospel and then forget those doctrines. We are to be doers of them.

Paul could say that " the preaching of the cross *is* (unto us which are saved) the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). Not 'it was when we were baptized'; the power of that basic Gospel lasts all our lives. To the Romans likewise: " I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ (i.e. I don't apologize for preaching the same old things): for it is the power of God unto salvation...for therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith (i.e. faith gets built up and up by that basic Gospel)" (1:18). The Galatians needed to keep on 'obeying the Truth' as they had done at baptism (Gal. 3:1); conversion is an ever ongoing process (cp. Lk. 22:32). It is " the faith which is in Christ" , the basic Gospel, which progressively opens up the Scriptures and enables them to make us wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:15). " Repent ye and believe the Gospel" might seem to be in the wrong order- for surely belief of the Gospel comes before repentance. And so it does. But the point is, life after conversion is a life of believing the basic Gospel which led us to conversion and repentance in the first place. Thus Rom. 6 teaches that we were once servants of sin...and we expect the sentence to conclude: 'But now you are servants of righteousness'. But it doesn't. We were once servants of sin but now we have obeyed the form of doctrine delivered to us...and are *therefore* servants of righteousness. The service of righteousness is a result of accepting " that form of doctrine" , perhaps referring to an early catechism or statement of faith taught to baptismal candidates, summarizing the power of the Gospel ⁽¹⁾.

The impact of true teachings must not, therefore, merely be that we receive a buzz of intellectual satisfaction that we have rightly expounded a Greek or Hebrew phrase or set of sentences. Those truths lead to true action in practice, if we truly believe them. Also, there is

a negative attached to all truths; if something is true, then therefore other things or ways of life are not true. There are several Bible passages which bring out this dualism.

" God is light	and in Him there is no darkness" (1 Jn. 1:5)
" God is faithful	and there is no unrighteousness in him" (Dt. 32:4)
" God is righteous	and there is no unrighteousness in him" (Ps. 92:16)

It is therefore quite valid to understand that a set of true doctrines by their very nature give rise to a set of untrue ones, to be rejected. But more personally relevant for each one of us, each truth we perceive leads to not only things we should do, but things we should not.

First Principles Only A Beginning

We must not see the learning of the basic doctrines and baptism as an end rather than a beginning. It is a tragedy if a man dies knowing and appreciating little more than he did at his baptism. Sunday School Christianity isn't the stuff of the Kingdom of God. We must go on unto perfection. " Let us cease to speak of the first principles of Christ, and press on unto full growth" (Heb. 6:1 RV). It almost implies that the Hebrews were so busy *talking* about the first principles that they had omitted to use them as the springboard to *growth*. The phrase " first principles of the oracles of God" (Heb. 5:12)) is better rendered in the RV mg. " the beginning of the oracles..." . The truth we learn and teach before baptism is but a springboard so much further. The writer seems to perceive the tendency to forever be digging up the foundations to make sure they are still there; for he says: " Wherefore let us cease to speak of the first principles of Christ, and press on..." (Heb. 6:1 RV). Sadly, as he goes on to say, he does have to speak to those particular readers of those basics again, but in a healthy spiritual life this shouldn't be the case. They should have used those basic doctrines to lead them further in following the example of He who was also " made perfect" , who reached 'perfection'. As He was " made perfect" (5:9), so we should strive to go on unto a like 'perfection' (5:14; 6:1). The inspired writer doesn't balk at the height of this calling, unattained as it has been by us all. But it is the lofty height towards which the power of the Gospel can propel us.

The processes of change and transformation described in this book will not occur immediately in the life of the believer. It takes time for our minds to metabolize the new realities of the Gospel. We have to be honest enough and free enough with our thinking to give these new ideas, this new wine of the Gospel, a chance to work. Otherwise we will have merely accepted one set of beliefs in place of another. The doctrines of the Truth lead to a holistic transformation of our being and personalities, if we respond to that web of teaching and implied behaviour appropriately. Important as the individual doctrines are, we must let them all work together in our lives. It is possible to over-define and over-categorize our doctrines to the point that we lose something of the totality of the experience of God, His Son and His word the Bible. It's rather like watching a breathtaking sunset, and having some guy next to you who insists on labelling all the colours and shades of colours, and then starts

loudly debating with himself about the difference between purple, magenta and deep red. The overall experience is shattered by the definitions and the debate over them.

Notes

(1) Alfred Nicholls makes a good case for this in *Documents Of The Faith*, (Birmingham: CMPA, 1989) p. 204.

1-4 Keeping The Faith

Paul at his bitter end could say that he had kept the Faith; but he brackets this together with finishing the race and fighting a good fight (2 Tim. 4:7; Eph. 6:12). These ideas of running the marathon and wrestling through the fight he uses elsewhere; but in the sense of striving for spiritual mastery over ourselves. It is *this* which is keeping the Faith. The need to remain in the Faith, to hold onto it, is one of the classic themes of the NT (Acts 14:22; 1 Cor. 16:13; Phil. 1:27; Col. 1:23; 1 Tim. 3:9; 2 Tim. 4:7). Jude begins by appealing for his readers to be keeping the faith, to contend for the faith; and concludes by asking them to build up each other in that faith. To preserve it is in order to build up; for our growth is on the basis of the pure Gospel which we believe. It is this which leads us on "from faith to faith" in an upward spiral of growth (Rom. 1:17). These passages do not mean that we must religiously hold on to our understanding of the doctrines of a 'Statement of Faith', *and nothing more*. It is true that the need to maintain doctrinal purity *is* taught in these passages; but those doctrines are not just things which have been delivered to us to 'keep' in the sense of maintaining a correct understanding of them. If this were the case, God would be rather like the Roman slave owner who endlessly dropped a spoon and asked his slave to pick it up, then he dropped it again, asked him to pick it up... There was no *purpose* in the exercise itself, it was simply a test of the slave's obedience.

But God is not like this. He has commanded us to keep the faith, to preserve the doctrines of the Faith, but there is a reason for this. Those doctrines are not just arbitrary statements which God invented as part of the boundless theological fantasy of an omnipotent being. They are intended to produce *behaviour*, and *this* is why they must be defended; because without the understanding of true doctrine, true spiritual behaviour is impossible. To simply hold on to the same doctrines we learnt before baptism, e.g. that God is one not three, is not holding the Faith in the sense the NT requires. This is simply clinging on to what we have always believed, just as most human beings cling on to their belief systems, especially as they grow older.

In 1 Tim. 4:1, Paul warns of a coming apostacy in the last days. 2 Tim. 3 repeats this theme by saying that in the last days, men will be "lovers of their own selves, covetous" etc.; these men / brethren will be "holding a form of godliness but denying the power thereof" (3:5 RV). Their keeping the faith was meaningless. This "form" of teaching which they held is that of Rom. 6:17- the form of doctrine which they accepted at baptism. They will 'hold the truth' but deny its real power. "From such turn away" (3:5) is the equivalent of the command in 2:21 to separate from those vessels unto dishonour which exist in the house of God, the ecclesia. So the problem of 'holding the faith' but denying its practical meaning is going to be *the* major apostacy of the last days, Paul reasons. Continuing in and keeping the Faith is parallel with running the gruelling marathon of struggle against ourselves, wrestling not with flesh and blood in the fight for real spirituality (2 Tim. 4:7). There have been theologians at times who

have argued that 'God did not command certain things because they are right, but certain things are right because God commanded them'. I sense this attitude at times amongst us too. But the Father doesn't seek obedience just for the sake of it. There is reason and purpose to His commands- hence David so praises them for this in Ps. 119. And so it is with all 'doctrine'.

Those who hold false doctrines have " missed the mark concerning the faith" (1 Tim. 6:21 RVmg.). The true faith has an aim, a mark to which it aims. A false 'faith' misses that aim. " Profane and vain babblings...increase unto more ungodliness" (2 Tim. 2:16)- they precipitate a downward spiral of practical behaviour.

1-5 The Importance Of Doctrine

There is, therefore, a tremendous power in the basic doctrines of the One Faith. We come, over time in our spiritual growth, to acknowledge " the Truth" (2 Tim. 2:25), to be led to a Godly way of life by not only *knowing* the Truth but *acknowledging* its power (Tit. 1:1). The NIV in Tit. 1:1 speaks of " the truth which leads to Godliness" . Thus true understanding is related to true Godly living- *if* we translate the doctrines into practice. The Passover would only be properly kept, Moses explained, if the meaning of it was understood (Dt. 6:20-25). John writes of *doing* the Truth (Jn. 3:20,21; 1 Jn. 1:6)- the true doctrines can't exist purely in the abstract, they must be lived. In this sense Jesus was " the Truth" in His life example as well as in His doctrinal teaching. Jude says that we build up ourselves on the foundation / basis of our most holy faith- *the* doctrinal faith of the Gospel. Titus was told to shew himself " a pattern of good works" through " in *doctrine* shewing uncorruptness" (Tit. 2:7). Timothy was to be " nourished up in the words of the faith [a reference to 'words' of basic doctrine which comprised a first century Statement of Faith?], and of the good doctrine" (1 Tim. 4:6 RV). True doctrine has the power of growth; it is the seed which is sown, leading to the fruit of good works. The basic Gospel (" doctrine" , mg.) of the cross is the active, outstretched arm of Yahweh the Almighty (Is. 53:1). We must let that power work. " Let your conversation (way of life) be as it becometh the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27). By taking heed unto *himself* and unto his doctrine, Timothy would be brought to salvation; 1 Tim. 4:16 speaks as if doctrinal purity and way of life are interconnected, seeing that our life is a reflection of the doctrine we believe. We must walk " uprightly (Gk. 'with straight feet', like the cherubim) according to the true Gospel" (Gal. 2:14 Gk.). Correct walk / behaviour is therefore related to the fact we have believed the *true* Gospel, i.e. we hold the right doctrines rather than the wrong ones. In this lies the importance of doctrine. This is why Is. 29:13,24 speaks of repentance as 'learning doctrine'; Israel went astray morally because they allowed themselves to be taught wrong doctrine.

The important doctrines of the basic Gospel bring forth the fruit of spirituality in the converts (Col. 1:6). The *euangelion* is pictured in Colossians 1 as a mighty, personal force working powerfully in the lives of men and women. It produced fruit, i.e. concrete actions (Philemon 11). The Gospel gives " understanding *that* ye might walk worthy" (Col. 1:9,10). We bear fruit and increase in this " by the [increasing] knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10 RVmg.). Thus we are to be renewed in knowledge, finding full assurance of our salvation in *understanding* (Col. 2:2; 3:10). The Hebrew word for "understanding" is also that for "certainty"- e.g. Josh. 23:13 "Know for a *certainty*..." [s.w. "understanding"]. To understand is to be sure, in God's language. Understanding, " being filled with the knowledge of his will" , *does* have a place in determining our daily walk in Christ. What and how we understand, and thereby what we believe, *does* therefore matter. To 'hinder the Gospel' is therefore the same as hindering the

spiritual growth of others in 1 Cor. 9:12; "the Gospel" is put by a figure for 'the spirituality which the doctrines of the Gospel brings forth, so close is the link between the Gospel and the inculcation of spirituality. We must walk worthy of that pure doctrine, in the abstract sense of doctrine, which we have received (Eph. 4:4-6). The purpose of keeping our understanding of the basic principles clear is that this will lead to true love and faith (1 Tim. 1:3-5). Timothy was to "charge" some that they didn't teach false doctrine, and the "end" of this charge [s.w. v.5] was "charity out of a pure heart...a good conscience...love unfeigned". This is what the true Gospel enables, and *this* is why it should be defended. Peter writes of "your obedience of the truth unto [issuing in] unfeigned love of the brethren...having been begotten again...of incorruptible seed, through the word of God" (1 Pet. 1:21,22 RV). The purity and truth of the "word of God" - and by this he surely refers to the Gospel message- is what issues in a true love for others, in comparison to the pseudo-love that fills our human experience in this world. Truth leads to true love- that's the message. This is the importance of doctrine. And yet how often have we used the concept of 'truth' to hate and divide our brethren...? John's writings reflect many struggles. But in the end they all forge into one ultimate struggle- between light and darkness, love and hatred, truth and error, life and death. Hence the struggle for purity of doctrine becomes parallel with the struggle between love and hatred. Love is therefore and thereby connected with purity of doctrine. Like John, Paul makes a seamless connection between defending true doctrine, and spiritually minded living in practice. Through destroying arguments and "every pretension that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God", we can "bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:3-5 RV). This is because, as Neville Smart put it, "of the radical part played in the salvation of the individual by the ideas and beliefs he holds in his mind. They are in fact the roots from which his fixed attitudes and his daily actions spring, and from which they take their particular tone and colouring"⁽¹⁾.

The way of the flesh, be it wanton immorality or simply living in the vanity of the mind, is not as the Ephesians had been taught the Gospel of Christ before their baptisms. That basic Gospel had very practical implications (Eph. 4:17-27). And more than this. The new wine of the Gospel will destroy a man who holds it unless he changes his life (cp. the bottle), so that it too is new. The new cloth of the Gospel will rip a man apart who doesn't change from his old clothing. Leaven is an apt symbol of the Gospel, in that it corrupts terribly *if it is left idle*. If the principles of the Truth lie dormant in our lives, they can only destroy us.

It seems to me that many of the classic wrong doctrines of Christendom are what have turned many people away from 'church', despite their evident interest in the person and teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Bible. The importance of doctrine hasn't been perceived. Threats of an orthodox hell, wild fantasies of a 'heaven', vain hopes of miracles, fears of getting possessed by demons...these ideas, I submit, all lead to people not having control over their lives, relationships, emotions, behaviours and thoughts. If our understanding of these things is believed rather than merely known or assented to, there is a real and exciting power for change made possible in our human lives. And moreover, if we can show the power of our unique understanding of the Gospel in our lives, we ought to have the ultimate means of converting the 'unchurched but interested'. The practical result of false doctrine has been well summarized: "Religions with angry and aggressive theologies have caused people to act out in a hostile and aggressive manner...a good example of this is the Islamic belief of Jihad, or holy war. Our forefathers believed that witches were evil and possessed by the devil. Given that belief and the belief that God was at war with Satan, then the appropriate treatment would be punishment or to put that unholy individual to death...the people who burned witches were not mean or bad people. They were influenced and controlled by a destructive

belief system. They truly believed in demons and that those possessed were evil and dangerous. These demon-possessed individuals were condemned by God anyway, so it made sense to sacrifice them" ⁽²⁾.

" The power thereof"

Inevitably we are prone to the boredom factor when it comes to our doctrines; we tend to use the same phrases to describe and explain them; the poetry of the ideas makes them almost slip over us; we know those doctrines. And there can arise a feeling that it's boring to hear the doctrines explained yet once again. We can think we know it all. And in some ways we do. But perhaps we only know on a surface level; perhaps we are only 'holding on' to our understanding because it's not convenient to shift to anything else. There was the same tendency under the old covenant. Solomon urged his son to " let not mercy and truth (a common idiom for the promises to Abraham) forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart" (Prov. 3:3). The small seed of the Gospel of the Kingdom can produce a mighty tree in the Kingdom (Lk. 13:18,19). It is easy to under-estimate the power of that seed- the Lord's parable seems to be making that point. I would seriously suggest that *all* of us ought to regularly study the basic doctrines of our One Faith for ourselves, personally. Paul told the Hebrews that he would have to lay *again* the foundation teachings of the Gospel, in order to renew them *again* unto repentance (Heb. 6:1-4). Chapter 2 is an all too abbreviated list of the very basic doctrines of the One Faith, and the effect they ought to have on us if we *seriously* believe them rather than simply *know* them.

God will work in our lives, to make us realize " the power thereof" , the importance of doctrine, which lies in the basic principles which we accepted in our instruction and baptism. We will go through the pattern of Job. He knew all the right principles, he understood right at the outset that God can bring trials upon us regardless of our moral behaviour. But as those tragedies deepened and lengthened in his life, he came to object to *the degree* to which he had to apply the principles which he understood. And finally he had to admit that he had only heard of God by the hearing of the ear; although in the end, he saw God. His experience of God in this life, thanks to those basic principles and his correct response to them, was a foretaste of the experience he knew he would have in the Kingdom (Job 42:5 cp. 19:25-27). According to Ps. 119:34, correct understanding is related to empowerment to obedience: "Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law: yea, I shall observe it". The more we understand *why*, the more likely we are to do it. David asks God to explain to him His word, because he is worried that he isn't obedient enough to it (Ps. 119:135,136). And there is an upward spiral here. Understanding leads to obedience, but the very practicing of God's ways grants us yet more understanding into those commands we are obeying: "I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep thy precepts" in practical, daily life (Ps. 119:99,100). The commandments of God in that sense "help" us (Ps. 119:175 RV). "The way of the Lord is strength to the upright" (Prov. 10:29). This ought to be somewhat disturbing for our community, who can truly say that they have a better understanding of God's word (at least technically) than anyone else. This, according to what David says, should result in a deeply empowered way of life, which in turn should drive us to yet deeper understanding. One fears that we are left knowing but not 'understanding' in the experiential sense of which David speaks.

Summing Up

Summing up, we have argued that 'faith' comes from a hearing of " the word of God" in the sense of 'the true Gospel'. This is why 'the doctrines of the one faith' and 'faith' are linked. This is the importance of doctrine. But faith never exists alone. James argues that there is no essential difference between faith and works. 'Faith' is not just credulity or a vague feeling of hope, but an active, driving force. There is " the work of faith" (1 Thess. 1:3; 2 Thess. 1:11); faith is something which ought to be 'done', the Lord taught (Mt. 23:23). Knowledge and faith are paralleled in John's thought (Jn. 8:32 cp. 14:1; and 6:69 cp. 11:27)- in stark contrast to this world's emphasis upon works rather than faith. Hence Isaiah's appeals to *know* and *believe* Yahweh (43:10); and the Lord's parallel of 'little faith' with little understanding (Mt. 16:7,8). *Pistis*, one of the NT words for 'faith', is translated in the LXX as both 'faith' (e.g. Dt. 32:20; Prov. 12:22) and 'truth' (Prov. 12:17; 14:22; Jer. 5:1). Indeed, another word used in the LXX is 119 times translated 'truth' and 26 times 'faith'. There *is* a connection between true knowledge of the Gospel and faith. And this faith is the basis for our works. We don't just learn the propositions of the one faith before baptism, and forget them. The triumphant spiritual life *lives them out*.

All that I have said about knowledge, of course, should not be read as meaning that knowledge alone can save. The essence of the temptation in Eden was to think that the tree of knowledge could bring salvation; it was an attempt to grasp at equality with God, according to Phil. 2, it was a vain belief that possession of knowledge / truth enables us to play God. And we, with our emphasis on the need for truth, for correct understanding, are especially prone to this major temptation.

Despite this caveat, we are to " repent and believe the Gospel" (Mk. 1:15); not just 'believe and repent'. Conversion means a life of belief in the Gospel. Faith *works* through love; it naturally, by its very nature, propels action. John's letters link faith and love, as if to show that the two are inextricably linked. Having real faith means that we are not " slothful" (Heb. 6:12); the clawing laziness of our natures will be brushed aside by the imperative to action which faith gives. And in 'the truth', the propositions of 'the one faith', we have the motivating power which no other religion can offer. I call the basic doctrines of the Gospel an " imperative" to action in that they demand action / response from us by implication, rather than for what they specifically in so many words set before us as 'requirements'. Initially, the Corinthians decided of their own volition to take up a collection for their poor Jewish brethren. Paul later encouraged them in this when their will to carry it out flagged, but the initial inspiration was from " the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ" (2 Cor. 9:13 NIV). That Gospel doesn't state that to obey it, one must give money to the poor believers in Jerusalem. But Paul perceived that *effectively* it did; this was, in their context, part and parcel of confessing the Gospel.

Time and again, faith and works are bracketted together. Abraham was justified by faith, Paul argues in Romans; and by works, says James. Even within Genesis, his faith was counted for righteousness in Gen. 15:6; but Gen. 22:15-18 stress that because he had " done this thing" and been obedient, thereby was he justified. The Centurion meekly said to the Lord: " I am not worthy...neither thought I myself worthy" ; but his *faith*, not his humility [as *we* might have expected] was commended by the Lord. That faith brought forth humility; just as John's letters see faith and love as parallel. The woman who washed the Lord's feet was likewise commended for her 'faith', although her actions were surely acts of devotion. But the Lord's analysis cut through to the essence that lay behind them: faith. There is a beauty to all this, in that salvation is by faith that it might be by grace (Rom. 4:16; Eph. 2:8). And therefore Hab. 2:4 says that living by faith is the antithesis of being proud. The life of faith, trusting thereby

in grace, is a life of humility. All the fruits of the Spirit thereby come together. In this sense, salvation is not by works. But if we can comprehend something of the purity of that grace, of God's willingness to save us regardless of our works; then we will *believe* it. And if we believe it, we will live a life of active and humble *working* for the Lord, not that we might be saved, but in thankful faith and gratitude for the magnitude of our experience of a grace, the height and depth of which, unfathomed, no man knows. We will "live", i.e. work through life, by faith (Hab. 2:4). If we truly accept God's ways, then we will walk in them; to not walk in them is to reject them (Ez. 5:6). This ultimately is the importance of doctrine.

I have explained that 'The faith' in terms of doctrinal propositions is related to faith as in the verb, to believe. And yet faith in practice, as you suddenly face a crisis demanding faith, isn't a question of quoting theology to yourself, instantly quoting part of your creed or statement of faith in order to have faith. Faith in practice is related to our experience, encounters, and friendship with God. It seems to me impossible in practice to distinguish between the element of faith which is doctrinal, intellectual, involving agreement to a set of propositions... and this latter element of faith which is subjective. But the two are inter-related. Neither is irrelevant, neither can the one exist without the other. This means that 'doctrine doesn't matter' is not a path which helps faith; but neither is the view that 'faith' is merely holding on to a set of propositions about doctrine until the end of our days.

Notes

(1) Neville Smart, *The Epistles of John* (Birmingham: CMPA, 1980) p. 71.

(2) Jerry Harris & Melody Milam, *Serpents In The Manger* (New York: Barricade Books, 1994) p. 27.

1-6 The Doctrine Of Christ

Jesus Epitomizes The Faith

My final point revolves around the way that the NT speaks of "the faith in Christ" or "the doctrine of Christ". "The faith", the body of doctrine comprising the Gospel, is all epitomized in a real person. To know we are "in the faith" is to know that Christ is in us (2 Cor. 13:5). "The faith", the set of doctrines we must continue believing, is paralleled with the man Christ Jesus. Jesus was "the word made flesh", and "the word" very often refers to the word of the Gospel rather than the whole Bible. The life which the corpus of doctrine brings forth is essentially the life and living of the man Christ Jesus. He was and is the supreme and living example of the living out of all the doctrines. It has been well said by Frank Birch that "Faith is not simply the intellectual acceptance of a body of doctrine. Faith is ultimately shown in a person, the man, Christ Jesus".

We can too easily assume that the purpose of the Bible, or the teaching of Jesus, the doctrine of Christ, is merely and solely to impart information. We can underestimate the degree to which the immediate intention of doctrine, of Jesus, was the transformation of human life. Many of us have been educated in an environment where the aim of teaching is to bring people to know things that have no practical effect upon their lives; yet this is most decidedly not how we should approach the words of the Gospel. Our model of learning has been 'from

jug to mug', i.e. there is the assumption that the teacher simply pours out their knowledge into the student's passive mental space. And then the student is tested as to the degree of retention of that knowledge. But as disciples, students, of the Lord Jesus, we are about something different. If the Lord were scheduled to give a class in one of our ecclesial halls, my sense is we would turn up with our video cameras, tape recorders, note books, pens and pencils. But when in reality He delivered the 'sermon on the mount', His listeners simply beheld a life lived, the reflection of His words in practice, "the word made flesh". He both preached *and* shewed the Gospel- in His life as well as His doctrinal teaching (Lk. 8:1). And so it should be with our teaching of others.

The word is to be made flesh in us as it was in the Lord. "The word" in the New Testament often refers to the basic Gospel rather than every inspired word which there is in the whole Bible. "The word of God (a title of Jesus)...the word of the Lord...is the word of good tidings which was preached unto you" (1 Pet. 1:23,25 RV). It is this word of the basic Gospel which is the "milk of the word" which enables us to "put away therefore all malice...guile...hypocrisies" (1 Pet. 2:1,2). And having spoken of tasting / drinking the word of God (the same figure is in Heb. 6:5), Peter then speaks of tasting the grace of the Lord Jesus (2:3). He is the word of the Gospel made flesh- to taste His Gospel, the word, is to taste of Him. The truth makes free; and yet it is Jesus who makes free (Jn. 8:32,36). The Truth in the person of Jesus, not just in our perception of doctrines in intellectual purity, is what liberates our personhood. When the blind man asks Jesus to tell him who the Son of God is, I don't think it was because he didn't recognize Jesus to be Messiah. He was surely saying 'Tell me more about Him / you, that I may believe properly' (Jn. 9:36). Jesus didn't give a doctrinal exposition. But instead He just tells the man to keep looking at Him and hearing Him. And in the next chapter, Jesus says that His sayings and His works are the same thing (Jn. 10:32,33,38)- whereas the Jews kept making a distinction between them. They said that His words, not His works, were the problem. His works, they said, were OK. But not His words. And Jesus tells them to "believe the works" - for they are His words to men. Thus the Lord showed that His actions were His words made flesh.

This basic message of the Gospel was "in the beginning", in John's language, right from Eden and Abraham, and was made flesh in the person of Jesus. God could have left it at just "the word", but to make it powerful and compelling of acceptance it had to be made flesh in a person. That word must become flesh in us too. This is why James 3:17 speaks of "wisdom" as if it has been made flesh in the believer: "The wisdom that is from above is pure peaceable, gentle, easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and hypocrisy". Abstract wisdom can't be spoken of in those terms; but wisdom made flesh in a person can be. The "wisdom" of which James speaks is "the truth" (3:14). The true Gospel, the doctrine of Christ, must be lived out in flesh; this is the whole intention. It isn't merely an intellectual test to see who can figure it out, and on that basis a relationship with God is given as a reward. One of the Hebrew words for "wisdom" also means "practical working" - and as so often in the Hebrew language, the Divine perspective is reflected in the language. Wisdom is "manifold in effectual working" (Job 6:11 RV); and compare the AV and RV of Job 12:16: "With him is...wisdom [AV] / effectual working [RV]". The man Christ Jesus was made unto us "wisdom"; in Him wisdom was made flesh.

Eph. 4:13 parallels the knowledge of the Son of God with "the unity of the faith". To know the one faith is to know Christ as a person. He *is* the essence of the one faith. Academic knowledge of a series of theological propositions in a 'statement of faith', no matter how accurate their formulation may be, is still not the same as 'knowing Christ'. To perceive those

doctrines as they really are, to know the unity, the sum of the one faith, is to know Christ as a person and come to "the fullness of Christ". The *unity* of the faith thus parallels the *fullness* of Christ. Those doctrines as propositions are a means to an end; and unless that is perceived they are little worth. So very often men have argued over those propositions, and in their argument have revealed that they really 'don't get it'- they simply don't know Christ as a person. They got caught up on the means rather than perceiving the end- which is to know the Son of God.

Part 2: An Analysis Of Basic Doctrine

2.1 God exists and we can have a personal relationship with a God we know.

Practicing The Presence Of God

Believing in God's very existence of itself affects a man's behaviour. "The *living God*" is a phrase often used by men in prayer or desperate straits. God *is*, He is the living One, and He therefore is a rewarder of those who seek Him. Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* [through the mouth of one of his characters] aptly observed: "If there is no God, everything is permitted". And the reverse is so true: seeing there *is* a God, all aspects of life come under this imperative. All religions apart from the Truth place a mask over God. To claim to be able to know the one true God is too much for them. So they have created false doctrines to cover Him up, to turn Him into what they would fain like or wish Him to be. In this sense, as Maxim Gorky said in a terrible phrase, "man created God after his own image". Gorky's idea is essentially repeated by Sigmund Freud in his book *The Future Of An Illusion*, where he claimed that the God people have in their minds is essentially a projection of their own father figure. If their father was abusive and angry, then this is how they see God. If their father was kind and loving, then this, they decide, is what God is like. Freud's theory is probably true for most people in this world who claim a belief in God. The false idea that God is an angry old man appeased by the blood and violent punishment of His son seems to me to be rooted in the poor parental experience of theologians. They have no experience of practicing the presence of God as Father. This is not the God revealed by open minded Bible study. For us who know and believe the true God of the Bible, God is God, who He is as revealed in His word, and we must resist this temptation to project onto Him our own perceptions of a father.

One of the greatest false doctrines of all time is the trinity- which claims that there are three "persons" in a Godhead. Trinitarian theologians borrowed a word- *persona* in Latin, *porsopon* in Greek- which was used for the mask which actors wore on stage. But for us, God doesn't exist in personas. He exists, as God the Father. And we practice the presence of that God. The real, true God, who isn't acting, projecting Himself through a mask, playing a role to our eyes; the God who is so crucially real and *alive*, there at the other end of our prayers, pulling at the other end of the cord... What we know of Him in His word is what and who He really is. It may not be *all* He is, but it is all the same the truth of the real and living God. And this knowledge should be the most arresting thing in the whole of our existence. So often the prophets use the idea of "knowing God" as an idiom for living a life totally dominated by that knowledge. The new covenant which we have entered is all about 'knowing' Yahweh. And Jer. 31:34 comments: "They shall all know me...for I will forgive their iniquity". The knowledge of God elicits repentance, real repentance; and reveals an equally real forgiveness. It is possible for those in Christ to *in practice* not know God at all. Thus Paul exhorted the Corinthian ecclesia: "Awake to righteousness and sin not: for some have no knowledge of

God" (1 Cor. 15:34 RV). The knowledge and practice of the presence of God ought to keep us back from sin. Ez. 43:8 RV points out how Israel were so wrong to have brought idols into the temple: " in their setting of their threshold by my threshold, and their door post beside my door post, and there was but the wall between me and them" . How close God was ought to have made them quit their idolatry. But their cognizance of the closeness of God was merely theoretical. They didn't feel nor respond to the wonder of it. And truly, He is not far from every one of us.

All first principle doctrines are meshed together, not only by logic and theory and exposition, but by the fact that one aspect of the spiritual life which they elicit leads into another. The existence of God means that there will be a judgment, and therefore our lives must reflect the fact that we believe that we live under judgment. The wicked think: " He will not require it. All [their] thoughts are, There is no God" (Ps. 10:4 RV). They admit there is a God insofar that they think God will not " require" an account of their lives; and thus effectively they act as if they are atheists. Their inward self-talk is that " There is no God" . Thus they say: " God hath forgotten...he will never see it...wherefore doth the wicked contemn God, and say in his heart, Thou wilt not require it?" (Ps. 10:11,13). Note the parallel between their thinking " There is no God" (:4), and thinking that God will not " require" our thoughts and actions of us one day. To believe in God is to believe in His ultimate judgment of us. And thus it would be true that if there were no God, anything would be possible for us.

All too easily we can think that we believe that 'God exists' just because we can reel off 'the watch argument' and other apologetic reasons. But " what we need to know, of course, is not just that God exists, not just that beyond the steely brightness of the stars there is a cosmic intelligence of some kind that keeps the whole show going, but that there is a God right here in the thick of our every-day lives...it is not objective proof of God's existence we want but, whether we use religious language for it or not, the experience of God's presence. That is the miracle we are really after. And that is also, I think, the miracle that we really get" [\(1\)](#). To this I for one can say 'Amen'. For it is in the apparent trivia of life that we see Providence the most clearly, hour by hour.

But it can be that we accept God's existence without really believing that He is, therefore, all powerful, and that all His attributes which the Bible reveals are actually functional and real for us today. The unfaithful captain of 2 Kings 7:2 mocked Elisha: " If the Lord should make windows in heaven, might this thing be?" . He forgot that there *are* windows in Heaven (Gen. 7:11; Mal. 3:10) through which blessing can be given. He believed in God's existence. But he didn't think this God could do much, and he doubted whether He would ever practically intervene in human affairs. We must be aware of this same tendency.

To know God in itself demands a change from us. When Job speaks his words of repentance, God says that Job has spoken about Him the things which are right (Job 42:7). This seems to me to be the correct interpretation of God's comment here, because Job's earlier words about God were not always "right". So to know God, to speak about Him, is to speak repentance. Quite simply, there being a God, and our knowing Him, makes a fundamental difference to our lives.

Giving All

The Levites had no material inheritance because " the sacrifices of the Lord God of Israel...are his inheritance...the Lord God of Israel was their inheritance" (Josh. 13:14,33).

Notice how "the Lord God" is put for what is sacrificed to Him. His very existence is an imperative to sacrifice to Him, despising all material advantage in doing so. Job comments that to make gold our hope and wealth our confidence is to deny "the God that is above" (Job 31:24,28). To trust in material wealth is effectively to proclaim ourselves atheists.

Elisha's Example Of Practicing The Presence Of God

Elisha was accustomed to thinking of himself in terms of a man who stood before Yahweh, in His presence, before His face (Heb.- 2 Kings 3:14). Naaman and his "company" 'stood before' Elisha (2 Kings 5:15,16). Remember that this was the Syrian army General, standing with a "company" in Israelite territory, at Elisha's house- at a time when 'companies' of Syrian soldiers carried out raids upon Israel (2 Kings 5:2). Any Israelite would've been terrified. But Elisha responds that he 'stands before' Yahweh. Elisha was so aware of how we live in God's presence, before His very face, that he wasn't the least phased by this. If only we can share this sense, of standing in God's presence... the most frightening of human situations will have little effective 'presence' because we know we are ultimately in God's presence, 24/7. But probing further, how, concretely and actually, did Elisha come to have this serenity? A clue is to be found in how in 2 Kings 6:17, Elisha prays that God will open the eyes of his frightened servant to behold the Angelic horses and chariots around him. Elisha was *so* confident they were there, that he didn't ask to see them himself. He *knew* they were there; he simply asked that his servant be enabled to see the unseen reality which he calmly knew was there. He of course had had first hand experience of the Angelic horses and chariots (a kind of cherubim) when he had been parted from Elijah in 2 Kings 2:11. This must have left an abiding impression upon him- he knew that those Angelic horses and chariots were in fact permanently encamped around him (cp. Ps. 34:7). And so we are surely to see significance in the way that Naaman came to Elisha's house with *his* horses and chariot- for this is surely a development of a theme of connection between Elisha, horses and chariots (2 Kings 5:9). Most other Israelites would've been petrified to have the horses and chariots of Naaman and a company of Syrians pull up at their door. But Elisha was quite unphased. He didn't even bother coming out to meet Naaman, knowing this was an insult to Naaman's pride, and was humanly certain to result in Naaman simply killing him and burning his house. Surely the horses-chariot-Elisha connection taught Elisha that in fact there were Angelic horses and chariots around him- he need not fear any human horse and chariot. There is no hint that Angelic activity is any less, or operates in any different way, for us today.

Notes

(1) Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1966) p. 23.

2.2 God is a personal being.

Whilst I believe God is an actual personal being, it's evident that the Hebrew Bible does use anthropomorphisms, i.e. speaking of God as if in human form. We need to see this in the context of Hebrew thought and language, which tends not to use abstract terms but rather uses language which alludes to physical body parts- e.g. 'look' becomes 'to lift up the eyes' (Gen. 22:4), anger is 'to burn in the nostrils' (Ex. 4:14), to reveal smething is to 'unstop someone's ears' (Ruth 4:4), to be without compassion is to be 'hard hearted' (1 Sam. 6:6), stubbornness is to be 'stiff necked' (2 Chron. 30:8), to prepare oneself is to 'gird up the loins'

(Jer. 1:17), to determine to go somewhere is 'to set one's face' (Jer. 42:15; Lk. 9:51). 1 Tim. 6:1 speaks of " the name of God and the doctrine" [R.V.]- as if the things of the name of God have a doctrine / teaching associated with them; and it's these things we wish to now explore.

Faith In Prayer

Many times the idea of " Your father which is in heaven" is used in the context of faith in prayer being answered (Mt. 7:11; 18:19; 21:22; Mk. 11:24; Jn. 14:13; James 1:5,6,17 etc.). It's as if the reality of God actually existing in Heaven in a personal form should be a powerful focus for our prayers.

Be Like God, Manifest His Image In Your Body And Life

This means that we have the highest imperative to develop into that which bears God's moral image, seeing we are made in His physical image- for God is a personal being. Exactly because " Thy hands have made me and fashioned me" , David asks for strength to put on His moral image: " Give me understanding, that I may learn thy commandments" (Ps. 119:73). The reality that He truly exists in a bodily form is almost terrifying when first grasped: " An 'impersonal God'- well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads- better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap- best of all. But God Himself, a personal being, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband- that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a *real* footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him?" ⁽¹⁾. Our Sunday School Christianity may well have been no more than kids spooking around with each other after an evening meeting. But the personal reality of God is startling and gripping and eternally demanding.

I think it is worth all of us pausing to ask the most basic question: Do we *really* believe that God exists? " Those who say that they believe in God and yet neither love nor fear him, do not in fact believe in him but in those who have taught them that God exists. Those who believe that they believe in God, but without any passion in their heart, any anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of despair even in their consolation, believe only in the God-idea, not in God" ⁽²⁾. The Jews must have been shocked when the Lord told them to " believe in God" (Jn. 14:1 RVmg.). For there were no atheists amongst them. What Jesus was saying was that their faith was in the God-idea, not in the real God. For if they believed the Father, they would accept His Son. We must ask whether we feel any real passion for Him, any true emotion, any sense of spiritual crisis, of radical motivation... The majority of our community have been taught belief in God from loving parents and caring Sunday Schools. And because of this we *do* need to consider whether our 'faith' is in the 'God-idea', or in the real and personal God who demands our all. Consider how the prison keeper " rejoiced greatly...having believed in God" (Acts 16:34 RV). He was unlikely to have been an atheist [atheism wasn't very common in the 1st century]. But he grasped for the first time the real import of a real and relevant faith in the one true God as a personal being.

Seeking to imitate the Father, God as a personal being, isn't always a recipe for an easy life now for us as humans. The word *Shaddai* is rooted in the word *shad*, meaning breast, and has the sense of fruitfulness. Thus " God said unto [Jacob], I am God Almighty [*shaddai*]: be fruitful [like me] and multiply" (Gen. 35:11). It seems Jacob sought to obey this by invitation

to be like God by having a child in his old age by Rachel- and yet, perhaps due to her age, she died in that childbirth, in that seeking to imitate the Father.

Job 31:17,18 reflects Job's understanding that because God had been a Father to him, from his youth, therefore he had always tried to be a father to others, e.g. by caring for the fatherless. This is what 'God manifestation' is about in practice. Whatever is true of God we must strive to make true of us. If God is manifested in us, then our aim should be for *His* positions, thoughts and feelings to become ours. And yet tragically humanity so often puts it the other way around- human religions seek to demand that 'God', or their version of Him, has *their* feelings and attitudes and ideas. They wish to create God in their image; rather than accept they are created in *His* image. Jonah was like this in Jonah 4:2,4. Jonah complains that God is "slow to anger", but Jonah sits there angry; and therefore God challenges him as to whether he does well to sit there so angry. The implication is surely 'If I'm not angry, then neither should you be- walk in step with Me and don't go your own way'.

Inspiration To Dynamic Living

In passing, I would argue that the false trinitarian notion that there are three 'personas' in the [supposed] trinity has led to a denial of God the Father being a real, live person, with all the unique individuality which attaches to a 'person'. The fact that God is a person means that who *we* are as persons, our being as persons, is of the ultimate importance. It has been observed, in more sophisticated language: "To predicate personality to God is nothing else than to declare personality as the absolute essence"⁽³⁾. Thus who we are as persons, who we develop to become, is indeed the ultimate issue. And further. Having a personal relationship with a personal God means that we in that process develop as persons after His image; for there is something magnetically changing about being in relationship with Him. We are changed from glory to glory, by simply beholding His face and inevitably reflecting the glory there, which glory abides upon us in the same way as it stuck to the face of Moses even after his encounters with the Angel of Yahweh (2 Cor. 3:18-21 RV). And yet we live in a world which increasingly denies us ultimate privacy or isolation; the loudness of the world is all permeating, all intrusive, to the point that Paul Tillich claims: "We cannot separate ourselves at any time from the world to which we belong"⁽⁴⁾. And at times, we would all tend to agree with him. We just can't seem to 'get away from it all' and be with God, no matter where we go on holiday, with whom we go, even if we slip off for an hour to be quite alone in the local park. But ultimately, I believe Tillich was wrong. We *can* separate from the world's endless call and insistent pull, even if we're stuck with an unbelieving or unhelpful partner, sniffly kids, long hours at work, the TV always on, the phone always ringing. Because we as unique and individual persons can *personally* relate to the *personal* God and His Son, thus finding the ultimate privacy and isolation which being human in this world appears to preclude. But further, it's actually in the very razzamattaz of our mundane, frustrated experience in this world that we can come to know God, and in which God reveals Himself to us. And how does all this happen in practice? To experience God is to know Him. So often the prophets speak of 'knowing God' as meaning 'to experience God'. Because God is love, to love is to know God (1 Jn. 4:8). Quite simply, how deeply we have loved [and I am speaking of 'love' in its Biblical sense] is how deeply we have known God- and vice versa. And that love is worked out in the very earthliness and worldliness of human life in practice.

Notes

(1) C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: MacMillan, 1947) p. 96.

(2) Miguel Unamuno, quoted in Philip Yancey, *Reaching For The Invisible God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) p. 184.

(3) Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence Of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1974 ed.) p. 97.

(4) Paul Tillich, *The Shaking Of The Foundations* (New York: Scribners, 1955) p. 53.

2.3 God created all things: God As Creator

The fact that we have been created by God means that life and existence around us has a purpose. Job was told that the very fact he had been created by God and his breath was in God's hand meant that his apparently inexplicable trials had indeed come from God and had a purpose (Job 12:10). If He created us in the first place, then we can expect that His hand will continue to mould our lives through trials in an ongoing, creative way.

Respect For God's Word And His Creation

God warned Judah that judgment really would come upon them- "I will say the word, and will perform it" (Ez. 12:25). This (especially in Hebrew) is a clear allusion to the rubric of the creation account- God spoke, and it was done. If we take that account seriously, then we will perceive the power of God's word. Judgment will come, for God has spoken it. And we should therefore live accordingly. Because of the work of God as creator and the power of the Word that formed it all, we should likewise stand in awe of Him and recognize the power of His word (Ps. 33:6-9). Ps. 147:15-19 draws a parallel between the way God sends out His word to give snow like wool, and then again to melt it; and the way that this very same word works in our lives: " He sendeth out His word, and melteth them...He sheweth His word unto Jacob, His statutes and His judgments unto Israel" . The word we have in our Bibles has the same creative power as the word through which the world was created and exists even now. Because we are created in God's image, the structure of our very bodies is an imperative to give ourselves totally to His cause (Mt. 22:19-21). Whatever bears God's image- i.e. our very bodies- must be given to Him. " It is he that hath made us, and [therefore] we are his" (Ps. 100:3 RV). We must be His in practice *because* He is our creator. So it is not that we merely believe in creation rather than evolution; more than this, such belief in creation must elicit a life given over to that creator. God as creator created man in His own image; and therefore we shouldn't curse men (James 3:9). By reason of the image they bear, we are to act to all men as we would to God Himself; we are not to treat some men as we would animals, who are not in the image of God. Because we are made in God's image, we should therefore not kill other humans (Gen. 9:6). James says the same, in essence, in teaching that because we are in God's image, we shouldn't curse others. To curse a man is to kill him. That's the point of James' allusion to Genesis and to God as creator. Quite simply, respect for the person of others is inculcated by sustained reflection on the way that they too are created in God's image.

Joy And Praise

Ps. 92 is a psalm of joy for the Sabbath (note that the titles of the Psalms are inspired- at least two of them are cited as inspired scripture in the NT). The Sabbath was ordained in order that man might think back on the reality of creation; and this most essential core reality should be an endless source of joy for us, if we believe it: " For thou, Lord, hast made me glad through thy work: I will triumph in the works of thine hands" (Ps. 92:4), just as the Angels shouted

for joy at creation. David's motivation for praise was simply because God has created him: "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14). Even in the cycle of death, which is part of the ongoing creation and renewal of the planet, there is something to praise. Thus David praised God because of the way that He takes away the breath of animals and they die, and then renews His creation; as "the Lord rejoices in his works" of creation, so David joins Him in a sublime fellowship of Creator and creature (Ps. 104:29-31) which flowed out of a basic belief in God as creator.

The fact that God Himself created us, as His sheep, "and not we ourselves" (a comment applicable, in essence, to theories of evolution and genetic engineering)... should lead us to ecstatic singing of praise before Him (Ps. 100:3). Likewise Ps. 96:2,5, and so many other examples, invite us to enthusiastically praise God, simply because "the Lord made the heavens". God as creator results in joy and praise amongst those of His creation who recognize Him as creator.

Faith

It's been observed that the Psalms are divisible into those which speak of "we" and those which are personal- "I". The "we" Psalms tend to plead God's history with Israel as the basis for present faith; whereas the "I" Psalms frequently plead the fact that God has personally created the writer as the basis for faith- e.g. "For you, Lord, are my hope, my trust [because] upon you I have leaned from my birth, You are He who took me from my mother's womb" (Ps. 71:5,6). The simple fact of our creation by God is a basis for real faith in Him.

With the Babylonian army besieging Jerusalem and every reason to be depressed, Jeremiah exalts in the creation record and has this as the basis for his faith that Yahweh's power is far from limited (Jer. 32:17). God's reply to this prayer is to repeat that yes, "I am the God of all flesh, is anything too hard for me?" ; His creative power is to be seen as the basis for Israel's Hope (Jer. 32:36-44). In the same context of Babylon's apparent might being brought down by God's hand, God reasoned that He would perform His will against Babylon, and this should be believed because His hand had created the heavens and earth (Is. 48:13,14). Likewise He taught Job the futility of having such metaphysical doubts about Him, of the joy there is all around us in creation regardless of our personal suffering...through an exposition of His power as creator. All this is why the disciples were inspired to faith that their prayers for deliverance would be answered by the recollection of the fact that God has created all things and therefore nothing is too hard for Him (Acts 4:24 RV). David begged for personal deliverance inspired by the thought: "Forsake not the works of thine own hands", i.e. his body and those of his people (Ps. 138:8). Ps. 146:5-9 outlines God's creative power at the start of things, and on this basis the Psalmist appeals to Israel to be considerate to the poor and those on the margins in society. Why? Because we here on this planet were and are the marginal compared to the God who lives so far away, physically and in all other ways. And yet He created us, and sustains us His creation. The wonder of this should lead us to seek out those whom we would otherwise overlook. God as creator has empowered the marginal by giving and sustaining our lives, and so should we do. Just because the Father gives His sun and rain to all without discrimination, we likewise should love our enemies (Mt. 5:43-45). This is the imperative of creation.

A living faith in God as our creator leads to an acceptance that He sees and knows all our ways, that life is lived utterly open before Him- and we should live it accordingly. Hence Isaiah uses the fact of God as creator to reason with those who argued (in their hearts at least)

that they could hide their ways from the Lord, saying "Who sees us, and who knows?". Isaiah's answer to this was that "Shall the thing framed (i.e. us) say of him that framed it, He had no understanding?" and therefore doesn't know nor understand what we do... (Is. 29:15,16).

Watch Our Behaviour

Ps. 94:8,9 tells the fools to be wise and watch their behaviour, because "He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? He that formed the eye, shall he not see?". Reflection on the fact that God truly is our personal designer and creator will lead to an awareness that He therefore sees and knows all things. These first principles powerfully link up, to exhort us to live life and speak our words knowing we are in the very presence of our creator. And remember that it was reflection upon the extent and nature of God's creative power which lead to Job's repentance; it isn't something we can passively reflect upon. Just because "Thy hands have made me and fashioned me: [therefore] give me understanding, that I may learn thy commandments" (Ps. 119:73). David realized that because he had been made in God's physical image he had a duty to desire to be spiritually reformed in His moral image; and thus he sought strength to be obedient to God's will.

Prov. 26:10 makes a link between God as creator, and God as judge: "The great God that formed all things both rewardeth the fool, and rewardeth transgressors". The very fact that God formed us means that we are accountable to His judgment. We can never, not for a nanosecond, avoid or opt out of the fact that we were created by God. And therefore and thereby, we are responsible to Him as our judge.

Labour

It is often forgotten that work is a consequence of creation, not the fall. It is intended by God as a means to partnership with Him and self-fulfillment as He intended. This is what is so wrong with the spirit of laziness which has been inculcated by the Western world. There is almost an ambition to obtain as much time as possible for 'leisure' and relaxation. Labour in whatever form was intended by God from creation. And the fact God created us should encourage us to feel adequate for the tasks He gives us. Moses felt so humanly inadequate, not strong enough for the task before him- and he was encouraged by God to find courage from the simple fact that God had created Moses' mouth and senses (Ex. 4:11)- and therefore God was able to strengthen them for what He needed to be done.

Perceiving The Value Of Persons

The command not to murder has as its basis the fact that human life is not for us to use as we will (Ex. 20:13; Lev. 17:11; Gen. 9:6). It is God's life and is His- and this applies to our view of others lives as well as our own. Others, therefore, are not for us to use as we will. Gentleness and sensitivity to the life of others, in family life, the workplace, on the road... is therefore an outcome of our belief that the 'other' person likewise has been created by God and has life from Him. To drive in an unkind way, to act in a thoughtless way to others detriment, is therefore the same basic error as taking human life in murder.

Only those who believe that we were created by God and have the possibility of eternal redemption can truly perceive the value of persons. Only they can grasp the worth of human beings, that we are not mere animals, but there is a wonder to human life which inspires us to

seek to save humans through the preaching of the Gospel. John Stott has powerfully commented: " When human beings are devalued, everything in society goes sour. Women and children are despised; the sick are regarded as a nuisance, and the elderly as a burden; ethnic minorities are discriminated against; capitalism displays its ugliest face; labour is exploited in the mines and factories; criminals are brutalized in prison; opposition opinions are stifled; Belsen is invented by the extreme right and Gulag by the extreme left; unbelievers are left to die in their lostness; there is no freedom, dignity, or carefree joy; human life seems not worth living, because it is scarcely human any longer. But when human beings are valued, because of their intrinsic worth, everything changes: women and children are honored; the sick are cared for and the elderly allowed to live and die with dignity; dissidents are listened to; prisoners rehabilitated, and minorities protected; workers are given a fair wage, decent working conditions, and a measure of participation in the enterprise; and the gospel is taken to the ends of the earth. Why? Because people matter, because every man, woman, and child has significance as a human person made in the image of God" .

And this is the essence of the teaching of Jer. 38:16: "As the Lord liveth, that made us this soul, I will not put thee to death". The fact God as creator created us is quite rightly used by Zedekiah as a reason to be truthful; and yet it also means that we should not take the life which God has given to another person. The whole of Job 31 records Job's response to those who assumed he must have sinned, seeing he was suffering so much. His response was that he would not have disregarded the needs of even his most humble servant, because "Did not he that made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?" (Job 31:13-15). The very fact that God created us means that we ought to respect each other and be sensitive to each other. And in the end, there is a link between God as creator and God as judge; because He created us, we are responsible to Him. Thus: "The great God that formed all things both rewardeth the fool, and rewardeth transgressors" (Prov. 26:10).

No Idolatry

Jer. 51:15-19 describes at length God's power in creation, and how this therefore makes all idols mere vanity. The God of Jacob " is not like them; for he is the former of all things" . If we really believe that God is creator, then we will not worship the things create by man, i.e. human idols, but God alone. Jeremiah earlier mocks those who say to an idol " Thou hast brought me forth" (Jer. 2:27). The implication is that there can be no idolatry for those who believe they were created by Israel's God.

If we truly realize that we are made in God's image, then we will not worship any idol: "Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God [i.e. in His image], we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device" (Acts 17:29). Thinking this through, is the implication not that humanity alone is made in God's image; *nothing* else is His image. Yet idolatry, in all its forms and guises throughout history, is based around the supposition that those idols are in fact an image of God and as such demand worship. God has revealed Himself through *people*, not through things which they have created.

Obedience

Because Yahweh God was Israel's creator, therefore He ought to have been their King (Is. 43:15). If we really believe His creative authority over us, then He will rule in every aspect of

our lives. Realizing that God is a "faithful creator" should inspire us to commit the keeping of our lives to Him in time of suffering (1 Pet. 4:19).

Humility

Because it is by God's will that we are created, because He is from everlasting to everlasting, because God is creator, we cast our crowns of 'reward' before His throne in a sense of unworthiness (Rev. 4:10,11), just as David in Ps. 8 had the overawing sense of 'Who am I...?' when he reflected upon God's creation.

Not Being Materialistic

Passages like Is. 37:19 almost define God by reason of His being uncreate. Whatever is created, is not God. And it follows that if we think that we have truly created anything, or that we are anything that God didn't create, then we are in fact playing God. Understanding God as creator, in its true, deep and thought-through sense, leads to an understanding of grace. That all we have, are, were, shall ever be, is purely His gift. Likewise, to take for ourselves what is God's is to play God. Materialism and selfishness are in this sense playing God. This was Achan's sin- to take what was devoted to God for himself. And this was why he is described as having 'stolen'. But from whom? From God (Josh. 6:18; 7:11). The fact God owns everything means that there can be no distinction between what is ours and what is God's. To think like that is to steal from Him. And hence the power and force of Mal. 3:8: "Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me". Have we robbed God in this way, especially in our attitudes and perceptions?

The simple fact we are created by God means that we are responsible to God in some sense, and therefore liable to His judgment. The stretched out hand of God is used as a figure both for His judgment of man (Is. 31:3) and also for His creation of man (Is. 40:22; 42:5; 44:24; 45:12; 51:13). The knowledge that we are created by Him makes us responsible to His judgment, and we have to look at our bodies, our lives which He has created ... and act accordingly.

Perceiving The Extent Of God's Grace

God is perfect, complete in and unto Himself. In that sense He has no "need" of us. His word speaks of such Divine need, but this is part of His limitation toward us with whom He is in relationship. So seeing that God is complete in Himself, why did He create us? Why... create anything? He did so from grace. We too easily accuse God of unfairness in creation, why this cruelty, why that suffering. And yet through all that we must remember that His very act of creation is grace. Despite having made all of creation, Yahweh has an especial interest in *us* His people, whom He has created to be His very own, out of all the billions of life forms which He has created. Jer. 10:16 brings this out: "Framer of all is He, but Israel His very own tribe". The sheer extent of creation is perhaps only to provide a backdrop to how special is God's grace toward *us*, whom He terms His "very own", as a child may term their favourite toy or stuffed animal. When a man looks to his maker, "he shall not look to the altars [of] the work of *his* hands, neither shall he have respect to that which *his* fingers have made" (Is. 17:7,8). God's fingers made the stars and all of creation (Ps. 8:3). By focusing upon *God's* works in creation, we will not be focused upon our works, but rather trust in God's creative grace.

2.3.1 Digression: Genesis And Creation Myths

Moses' Intention In Genesis

Let's remember that under inspiration, Moses wrote Genesis, presumably during the 40 years wandering. He therefore wrote it in a context- of explaining things to Israel as they stumbled through that wilderness, wondering who they were, where they came from, where they were headed. This explains why there are so many links within the Pentateuch- e.g. the Spirit "flutters" over the waters in Gen. 1:2, just as God like an eagle [a symbol of the Spirit] "flutters" over Israel in bringing about their creation as a nation (Dt. 32:1). The point is, what God did at creation, He can do at any time. As He made the waters "swarm" in Gen. 1:20, so He made the waters of the Nile "swarm" with frogs (Ex. 7:28) in order to save His people from a no-hope, chaotic, disordered, hopeless situation. The command to subject the animals in Eden [the land promised to Abraham?] corresponds to later commands to subject the tribes living in the land (Gen. 1:28 = Num. 32:22,29; Josh. 18:1). The "fear and dread" of humans which fell on the animals after the flood is clearly linkable with the "fear and dread" which was to come upon the inhabitants of Canaan due to the Israelites (Gen. 9:2 = Dt. 1:21; 3:8; 11:25). When Moses "finished the work" of the tabernacle (Ex. 40:33), there is clear allusion to God 'finishing the work' of creation (Gen. 2:2). The whole phrase "Behold I have given you..." (Gen. 1:28) occurs later when the Priests are told what God has given them (Ex. 31:6; Lev. 6:10; Num. 18:8,21; Dt. 11:14). The reference to Cain as the builder of cities in Canaan (Gen. 4:17) was to pave the way for Moses' later commands to Israel to destroy those cities. Moses records the braggart song of Lamech, uttered in the presence of his wives, as a warning as to what had happened as civilization developed in the very same area that Israel were now to colonize and build a society within- the warning being that as any society develops, there arises increased temptation to demand retribution for the slightest offence, and to assert oneself rather than trust in God (Gen. 4:17-26). And obviously the sanctification of the 7th day was based upon God's 'resting' on the 7th day in the Genesis record. The later command not to covet what looks good is very much rooted in a warning not to commit Eve's sin of seeing the fruit and yielding to temptation (Ex. 20:17 = Gen. 3:6). The repeated references to the "journeys" of the people in the wilderness had as their basis the description of Abraham *taking his journey* through the desert to the promised land (Gen. 13:3); the very same two Hebrew words in italics recur in the command to Israel to now 'take their journey' (Dt. 10:11), following in the steps of their father Abraham. Moses' books were helping the wilderness generation to see where they were coming from historically. Passages like Gen. 12:6 now take on special relevance: "The Canaanites were *then* in the land". Moses was saying this as his people were about to enter a Canaan likewise occupied by Canaanites. He was bidding the people see their connection with their father Abraham, who *then* lived with Canaanites also in the same land.

In passing, note that the table of Middle Eastern nations in Gen. 10 somehow omits Israel. And then the story of Israel begins with Abraham in Genesis 11 and forward. It's as if there was initially no place for Israel, they came in late on the scene, born as a nation by God's grace. There is no preparation in Genesis 1-10 for the appearance of Israel; reading as it were for the first time, we would find Israel's appearance as a nation in Palestine as outlined by Moses a kind of surprise, something unexpected, which the opening narrative hadn't prepared us for. They should have had no place in the Middle East; but by grace God gave them a place. This is the essence of the Palestine conundrum today. Only those who share Moses' inspired perspective can see that Israel do have a right to the land which was initially not

theirs. It seems to me that Moses was seeking to explain to Israel that their place on earth was by God's grace alone; they had no inherent right to their kingdom or land.

Genesis 1-3 In Context

The early chapters of Genesis were intended as the seed bed from which Israel would understand that they had grown. The nature of the record of creation was therefore primarily for their benefit. The lesson for us likewise must be- that what God did at creation, He can in essence do in our lives and experiences too. The record of Gen. 1-3 especially opens up in a new way when viewed from this angle. Difficult parts of the account seem to fall into place. Gen. 2:5 says that the creation account explains how God created "every plant of the field before it was in the earth / *eretz* / land [promised to Abraham]". Quite simply, the plants Israel knew had been made by God and somehow transplanted or moved into the land, just as one does when developing a garden. It was Moses' understanding that on entering the land, God would be planting Israel there (Ex. 15:17; Num. 24:6), just as God had planted in Eden (Gen. 2:8 s.w.). And when we read that Eve was "the mother of all living" (Gen. 3:20), this was in its primary application explaining to the Israelites in the wilderness where *they* ultimately originated from. Israel were to trace their first origins and parents back not merely to Abraham, but to Adam and Eve. Num. 35:3 [Heb.] uses the term to describe the "all living" of the congregation of Israel; indeed, that Hebrew word translated "living" is translated "congregation", with reference to the congregation of Israel (Ps. 68:10; 74:19). Note how the Hebrew idea of 'all living' repeatedly occurs in the account of the flood (Gen. 6:19; 8:1,17 etc.)- which we will later suggest was a flood local to the area which the Israelites knew and which had been ultimately promised to Abraham. "All living" things which were taken into the ark therefore needn't refer to literally every living thing which lives upon the planet, but rather to those species which lived in the flooded area, the earth / land / *eretz* promised to Abraham. I've explained [elsewhere](#) that the garden of Eden can be understood as the land promised to Abraham, perhaps specifically being located around Jerusalem, the intended geographical focus for God's people; and that the term *eretz* can be used to describe the land promised to Abraham rather than the whole planet- see [here](#). In fact the whole record of Adam and Eve in Eden is alluded to multiple times in Moses' law. As they were given a command not to eat, so Israel were asked not to eat certain things. As there was a snake who was there in the 'land' of Eden, so there was the equivalent amongst Israel- the false teachers, the tribes who remained, etc., the "serpents of the dust" (Dt. 32:24- an evident allusion to the language of the snake in Eden). As Adam and Eve were to "be fruitful and multiply" in the land / Garden of Eden (Gen. 1:28), so Noah and his sons were to do just the same in the same land after the flood (Gen. 9:7); and the children of Abraham were promised that they would do likewise in the very same land (Gen. 35:11). The descriptions of the promised land, covered with good trees, whose fruit could be freely eaten, were reminiscent of the descriptions of Eden. Israel were to enter that land and tend it, as Adam should've done; they were to learn the lesson of Adam and Eve's failure in their possession of Eden. But as Eve lusted after the fruit, so Israel lusted after the fruits of Egypt. As Adam and Eve failed to "subdue" the garden of Eden (Gen. 1:28), so Israel failed to fully "subdue" [s.w.] the tribes of the land (Num. 32:22). They subdued a few local to them; but they never really rose up to the reality of being able to have the whole land area promised to Abraham subjected to them. And so Lev. 26 and Dt. 28 promised a curse to come upon the land [of Eden / Israel] for their failure within it, just as happened to Adam and Eve; and of course ultimately they were driven out of the land just as Israel's very first parents had been. As the *eretz* / earth / land was initially "without form and void", so the same term is used of the land of Israel after the people had been driven out of it (Jer. 4:23). As thorns and thistles came up

in the land [and those plants are unknown in some parts of the planet], so they did again when Israel were driven from their land (Gen. 3:18; Hos. 10:8). As Adam was punished by returning to dust, so Israel would be destroyed by dust (Dt. 28:24).

Creation Myths And Divine Truth

I recall as a young convert being deeply disturbed when I realized that there were many myths of creation existing in the peoples that surrounded the Israelites [the Sumerians, Babylonians, Canaanites, Egyptians, Hittites etc.] which were extremely similar in some aspects as the Genesis record of creation. Indeed, in a few places the correspondences are almost verbatim the same- “There was not yet rain...there was not yet a man to till the ground” (Gen. 2:5) reads very similarly to an Egyptian text that speaks of “When there was not yet rain...when there was not yet the fear that came to be...”.

I assured myself that all those peoples must have copied their ideas from the Genesis record, rather than vice versa. But I was never totally comfortable with that view. Having now read through some of the myths [\(1\)](#) and reflected upon the situation, and faced up to the fact that some of them were around well before Moses wrote Genesis, I’ve come to another view. It seems to me that the Genesis record, under inspiration, is a commentary upon those myths, telling Israel the truth, bringing out where they were wrong, and why. One Egyptian myth claimed that man was created from dust, and then the goddess Hat-Hor holds the symbol of life to the mouth and nose of the created body. You can see the similarities with the Genesis record. The Gilgamesh Epic also has a primeval man seeking to eat forbidden fruit. Many creation myths included the idea of the first woman having two sons, who then have conflict with each other and even commit fratricide. The tension between farmers and cattle raisers in southern Babylonia was at the root of a number of myths very similar to the Cain and Abel account. But Moses, under inspiration, is giving Israel the true account, after their long period under Egyptian influence. So Genesis may *allude* to the other stories closely- as they were myths and legends which would’ve been well known to Israel as they walked through the desert. They would’ve discussed them, and some probably believed them. And so Moses wrote Genesis to show them where the truth really was from God’s viewpoint. This explains something which has been widely observed by students of the ancient Middle East: the Israelites had no myths in their culture. The surrounding nations [cp. the world around us] were full of poorly defined and contradictory myths relating to life’s origin. But the Israelites were different. They had ultimate truth for them clearly laid down.

As we’ve said, Genesis itself was part of a five volume, Divinely inspired masterpiece. The purpose of Genesis was to teach God’s people something in their day, whenever and wherever that was or is experienced by the readers / hearers of the book. This is why so many parts of the Bible allude back to the Genesis record of creation, in seeking to inspire faith *now* that God will powerfully act creatively and dramatically in *our* lives today.

God created matter. Ultimately, all that exists was made by Him; and by faith we believe that things which now exist were not made from what already existed apart from God. The Genesis record of creation, however, emphasises how God brought order out of chaos. He brought this present world of beauty and order out of a darkness that brooded upon a sea, and from an earth that was “without form and void”, the Hebrew images behind the words implying ‘a chaos’. The frequent references to the earth and sea ‘bringing forth’ (e.g. Gen. 1:12,24) use a Hebrew word which means ‘to let something which is within to come out’. The present world was created by a re-organization of things which existed in some form

before. This means that when our own lives, or the collective life of God's people, appears to be in chaos- then we can in faith reflect that God has brought beautiful order out of chaos, and He can likewise powerfully bring order to what seems hopeless. This is the context of the creation allusions in the laments of Ps. 74:12-17; 89:10-15; Is. 51:9 etc.

Genesis And The Creation Myths

There are some very marked differences between the Genesis record of creation, and the contemporary creation myths. Those differences would have been so apparent to the Israelites, as they heard Moses first give or read them the inspired account of Genesis.

Creation By The Word

One major difference was that Moses told them that God created everything by His word. He spoke, and it was done. This was markedly different to the [then] popular myths of gods hatching eggs, or procreating to produce the world. Repeatedly, later Scripture alludes to the fact that it was by the word of God that the world was created; and that same powerful, re-forming, saving word was and is that heard by His people still (Ps. 33:6,9; 104:7; 147:15-18; 148:3-5; Is. 40:26; 44:23; 48:13; 50:2; 55:10). A. Heidel comments: "The word of the Babylonian deities was not almighty. On the contrary, the word of the creator in Gen. 1 is almighty. He commands and the result is in perfect conformity to his command...there is a profound difference between the Bible and non-biblical religions" [on this point of the word being the agency of creation] ⁽²⁾. This feature of Genesis 1 paves the way for Ex. 25:1 and many other passages later in the Pentateuch recording how "God said...", and Israel therefore ought to obey His word of command in 'creating' the tabernacle out of existing materials. Thereby they would show themselves at one with the Angel-elohim, who had earlier likewise obeyed God's word of command in creating the world. God spoke, and it was done. And so when God speaks now to His *elohim*, His people- it ought likewise to be done.

The Value Of Persons

Another unique feature of the Genesis account of creation is that God is described as resting on the seventh day. No creation myth includes this feature ⁽³⁾. Moses developed this theme later, when he taught that therefore, man was to rest on the seventh day likewise. Whilst God is omnipotent, there is what I have called elsewhere 'the limitation of God'- in that He *portrays Himself* as somehow limited, only allowing Himself to use some of His limitless power. This idea of a God who seeks to come so close to us that He limits His limitless power is altogether wonderful. The pagan gods were all some kind of supermen, untouched by human emotions and limitations. But the true God is not like that; He has always wished to come so close to His creatures. In a related way, the Genesis record brings out how God has delegated so much freedom and freewill to His creations. Gen. 4:20-22 explains how it was human beings who themselves developed skills of metal working, cattle breeding, music etc. The creation myths of the world surrounding the Israelites assumed that these *very things* were "the outcome of the internal conflicts of the gods". The Sumerian legends taught that things like ploughs and axes were created by the gods, and they should be praised for them. Moses teaches a far higher respect for humanity, in keeping with the hugely-significant teaching that man was made in God's image.

The sheer concentration of God's will that went into the creation of humans is brought out by a correct reading of Gen. 1:26: "Let us make man in our image". The Hebrew construction

used here has been described as “a plural of deliberation”. C. Brockelmann describes it as “a form of speech which occurred primarily in self-deliberation”. In other words, an individual may use a plural to describe his or her decision. Take David’s words in 2 Sam. 24:14: “Let *us* fall into the hand of the Lord...but let not *me* fall into the hand of man”. Ezra 4:18 has a King saying: “The letter ye sent unto *us* hath been plainly read before *me*”. In Is. 6:8 we read the same of God Himself: “Whom shall *I* [singular] send, and who will go for *us*?”. And this would enable us to better understand God’s decision making in Gen. 11:7: “Go to, let *us* go down, and there confound their speech”. The same sort of thing occurs in modern English slang: “Let’s see...” = ‘let me personally consider’; ‘Give us that pen’ = ‘Give me that pen’; ‘We was just...’ = ‘I was just...’. So “Let *us* make man...” may refer to God’s personal self-deliberation in making human beings; to a Semitic reader of the original, it would emphasize the vast passion which God Almighty put into this decision. And it therefore follows, that He passionately wishes to have a very definite purpose with us, that He *so* loves us, and wishes only our eternal good.

The creation myths tend to leave man as created, as a servant to the gods. The implication is that the true meaning of life is the same as our mere existence. We are created to exist, so, we just exist. That’s what life is about. This isn’t existential, philosophical nonsense. That’s a sad, real, concrete fact of what this life is about for many people on the earth. They’re just existing. The Genesis record, however, gives more purpose to life than just existing. Adam was created, and he started existing. But, as the account brings out, he couldn’t find the meaning of life by merely existing in an ideal physical, material situation. Just like people today don’t find satisfaction in that, either. He needed Eve; he needed some form of human community, of fellowship, of binding with others, in order to find fulfilment. And so it is with us, driven as we are towards isolationism and individualism by the abuses of society around us.

No creation myth includes the idea of the Divine Creator then *blessing* His creation. Here we see the surpassing grace of God. He lavishes His love upon what He created. None of the creation myths include such a wonderful feature. Within Genesis, this idea of blessing of course paves the way for God promising to “bless” the children of Abraham, and the blessings upon them with which Deuteronomy concludes (see too Lev. 9:22; Num. 6:22-24). The pagan creation stories sometimes spoke of the things created by the gods then blessing *them*. The Sumerians recorded that at ‘creation’, “The whole universe, the people in unison, to Enlil in one tongue gave praise” ⁽⁴⁾. But the true God, the God of all grace, not only creates His people and other creatures, but then blesses *them*! And the spirit of that grace should be seen in all our relationships. The Sumerian and Babylonian myths speak of people being created in order to serve the gods, “to bear the yoke of the gods” (S.G.F.Brandon, *op cit* p. 115), to relieve them in their everyday work. But the Genesis creation has God creating man and giving him great freedom, and blessing him. It has often been rightly observed that the first use of a word in Scripture should influence how we later understand it as we read through the Bible. ‘Blessing’ in Gen. 1 is clearly related to the ideas of fertility and reproducing. When we later read that God has ‘blessed’ us His people with the Abrahamic blessing of forgiveness (Acts 3:24-26), the implication is that this must lead to some bringing forth of fruit. We can’t simply be passive to what we’ve received. We must go forth and multiply it, in sharing it with others, in bringing forth spiritual children, in creatively forgiving others...

The Babylonian Marduk myth and Ras Shamra epic has the creation story reaching a climax and crowning conclusion with a temple being built for Marduk the creator (5). The Biblical

record is quite different- the climax to the story is the creation of a man. We see in this the supreme importance attached to humanity by the one true God; and this tacitly paves the way for the explicit New Testament teaching that the human body is the temple of God (1 Cor. 6:19)- supremely of course demonstrated in the Lord Jesus, who was in person the temple (Jn. 2:21).

The contemporary Near Eastern legal codes prescribed the most severe penalties for crimes against the wealthy and their property. Rich people were given lesser punishments than poor people for the same crime. The value of persons reflected in Yahweh's law meant that all people were judged equally before the law, and truly there was no respect of persons with the true God. Both father and mother are placed together as worthy of equal honour (Lev. 19:3; Ex. 20:12)- whereas the contemporary laws were oriented towards respect of the male rather than females.

The Supremacy Of God

The Genesis creation account repeatedly alludes to the Baal myths of creation- in order to show that it is God and not Baal who controls the cycles of nature and has brought an ordered creation out of chaos. Moses states early on in his inspired account that God created light. The Egyptians considered that light was in itself a great god, Re. And “in Persian cosmology...light...is uncreated and eternal” ⁽⁶⁾. So to say that the one true God created light, and light is not a god in itself, was a radical thing. And hence the account of the fourth day of creation is longer than the accounts of the other days; because the sun, moon and stars were seen as gods in themselves. The moon god, Sin, was thought to be the one who “fixes day, month and year”. But Genesis 1 teaches that it is the one God who created the moon, who set the moon and stars to define time periods. There was only one God, one creator. We are to look beyond all created things to the Creator behind them. The peoples around the Israelites worshipped created things as if they were God. Moses was teaching that no, there is only one God, and we must primarily worship Him rather than anything which He has made. Paul brings out the error of worshipping the created rather than the Creator. And this echoes down to our day; where we can so easily worship the ‘idols’ of which this world is so full, rather than the ultimate Creator. That there is only *one* Divine Creator is a challenge to *any* form of idolatry.

When we read that we are made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26), the Hebrew word for ‘image’ is that to be used later throughout the Old Testament concerning the ‘images’ of idols. Hence the awefulness of Israel making images of the false gods, in human likeness (Ez. 16:17)- because this was a studied statement that they rejected the one true God as their creator, in His image. If we are made in God’s image, then we simply cannot admit the existence of any other image of God- which, in the end, is what all the gadgetry and idols of this world amount to.

The Account Of The Flood

The Biblical account of the flood can be analyzed in similar terms to the creation record. The Gilgamesh Epic and other Babylonian myths also record a universal flood, in which one man, named Ziusudra in Gilgamesh, and his family are saved. And after the flood, this saved man [called Utnapishtim, Deucalion, Demarius, Manu etc] offered sacrifice. They believed that all mankind perished, and that the roots of their present culture went back to the time of the flood.

And yet when we compare the truth Moses taught Israel, and the surrounding myths of the flood, there are significant and instructive differences.

The Value Of The Individual

Whilst nearly all the flood myths feature the offering of sacrifice, none of them record the prohibition of eating blood which was given straight after the flood (Gen. 9:4). Indeed, only in Israel did blood feature as a major element of sacrifice at all. Blood representing life, the clear teaching was that God wished His people to value human life, and never to seek to take another's life to oneself. The value of persons is brought out in a very powerful way, even though we are reading the record of God's judgment of His creation. The Biblical account of the flood is introduced by the 10 generation genealogy of Gen. 5, tracing Noah's ancestry back to Adam. The Babylonian myths preface their flood record likewise with a 10 generation genealogy, ending in Ziusudra, the man who survived the flood. But those 10 men listed in their genealogies are supposed to be great kings. They are described as having ridiculously long lifespans- e.g. Alagar was supposed to have lived 72,000 years. The Biblical record is much different. The genealogy presents ordinary and imaginable men, with longer but realistic lifespans. The ship of salvation in the Gilgamesh Epic is loaded with food and silver and gold. The Biblical record says nothing of this- rather is the focus upon the salvation of people. In another myth, Utnapishtim, the one who survives the flood, is turned into a hero and becomes a god. But of course Moses' inspired record is different. The flood story ends with Noah dying- not becoming a god. And Noah not only remains human, but he remains *very* human- because he goes out and gets blind drunk after he comes out of the ark. Moses' point is surely to show that real human lives really do intersect with Almighty God's work, words and actions.

The Biblical hope is that we as persons, as individuals, will be saved, and not turned into something essentially unrelated to who we are today. 'God manifestation' is not in that sense about us losing our personhood and becoming subsumed amongst the gods. True Christianity isn't about Jesus being God Himself, but about Him being the very human son of God, who is titled to this day "the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5)- for all the height of His exaltation to Divine nature. It's not about feeling that just because we are human, we are inevitable sinners and total filth in the eyes of God, attracting His wrath just for being alive. It ain't no sin to be glad that you're alive. The anger of God is not upon every foetus that is conceived; rather does He share our joy. Neither does He breathe a sigh of relief when a man dies; rather does He share our grief at the tragedy of our human position. This isn't a Biblical view of ourselves. Nor is true religion about 'playing God' as in the New Age approach to life. And it's not about this earth being burnt up and us being whisked off into space; it's about the transformation and salvation of this very planet, corrupt and polluted as it is. All these wrong approaches reflect a basic dis-ease with ourselves as persons, a desire to escape and be assumed amongst the gods into something other-worldly, as Utnapishtim was. Who we are is in a sense who we will be, in that we are even now associated with the Name of Yahweh [who He is, is who He will be]. Instead of playing God, we are to get on with being who we are, not being ashamed of our humanity. Of course, like Noah arising from his drunkenness, we should be ashamed of our sins; but the whole wonderful purpose of Moses' record is to show that God's heroes aren't superhuman, they are in fact very human, a Noah who shamefully goes out and gets stoned after God has shown him His wondrous grace; and yet the likes of Noah are the very ones whom God saves.

The Genesis record deals with the sin of Adam, Cain and the world of Noah's day within a certain pattern- God notices sin, judges it, condemns the guilty, yet mitigates the punishment somewhat, preserves the righteous, and there is a theme of new life and the bringing forth of children occurring after judgment. It is in fact through God's judgment of sin that we have a window into His mercy and sensitivity. In wrath He remembers mercy.

The Nature Of God

Gilgamesh speaks of how there was a discussion amongst the gods as to what to do with humanity. Human sin is not given as the reason for their decision, but rather mere capriciousness of the gods. The Atrahasis epic gives the reason as the gods becoming angry that the humans are not serving them enough. In Gilgamesh, the majority of gods wanted to destroy humanity, but some, led by the god Ea-Enki, wanted to save. What is totally unique about the Biblical record is that there is only *one* God involved. Within Him there is this tension between judging sin, and lovingly saving His wayward creation. And thus we read the incredible statement that God "repented" that He had created man (Gen. 6:5). In Gilgamesh, there is a tension amongst the gods; Ea-Enki becomes so passionate to save humanity that he rebels against the other gods. In the true, Biblical record, that tension between gods is expressed as a tension within the heart of the one true God. He created mankind; and then He wanted to destroy them for their sin; and yet He struggled with this. The record leads us to enter into the Divine pain, the struggle of God. This is totally and utterly unique; this is the truth, which all other religions and myths could never get hold of. Moses' record was paving the way for his own experience of this aspect of Israel's wonderful God. For he too had experienced God stating His judgment of His people, 'repenting' that He had created them as a nation, seeking to destroy them, and yet being sensitive to Moses' pleas. One sees the same Divine pain in later Scripture, especially in Hosea. There, God alternates between having no mercy on His people, and showing mercy; not being their God any longer; yet being their God. And like a wounded lover, God declares: "I will love them no more"; and yet in the final, tear-jerking outpouring of God in Hosea 14, we read the wonderful conclusion: "I will love them freely". This is such a hard thing to really come to terms with. For how can a God who is all powerful and who knows the end from the beginning, have such feelings? Yet those Divine feelings are legitimate, they really were felt, and they are felt by God Almighty about us at this very moment. It is so much easier to do as Gilgamesh did, and have a judgmental god and a saviour god; or to have a 'good God' and a bad, evil satan, as in the theology of today's apostate Christianity. But the wonder of Yahweh is that this one and only true God has these two aspects within Him. To know something of this Divine struggle, this surpassing love of God, is something that flows out from a belief in there being only one God. The issues of grace and truth, love and judgment, mercy and justice, are all brought together in the awesome personality of this God with whom we have to do.

This essential struggle of God is brought out by the account of God's 'repenting' that He had cursed the earth. According to one translation, Gen. 8:21 can read: "I will never again declare the earth to be cursed (as I have done hitherto) on account of humanity, because the imagination of the heart is evil from one's youth". The reference to cursing the earth surely alludes back to the curse of Gen. 3:17. Could it be that God is saying that He 'repented' not only of the flood, but of the cursing of the earth in response to Adam's sin? The final outworking of that repenting of course was through the work of the Lord Jesus, and the ultimate enablement of Paradise restored on this earth. It's as if God is as it were coming to terms with the evilness of man; although He perceives that man is bent on sinning from his youth, by grace, He promises never to destroy mankind. In wrath, He remembered mercy.

The sign of the rainbow is described as God hanging up His bow (Gen. 9:13). To hang up your bow was an idiom for ceasing from conflict (Hab. 3:9-11; Ps. 7:13). It was as if Yahweh the warrior was laying aside His bow, ending His conflict with mankind. The contemporary flood myths articulate all this in terms of there being a dispute amongst the gods; some wanted to destroy mankind, others wanted to show mercy; some regretted the earlier judgments against mankind, others didn't; some wanted to assure mankind that he wouldn't be destroyed; others argued that he must face the consequences of his sin. Here the Biblical record is so amazingly different. All these emotions are portrayed as occurring within the one and only God. As humanly incomprehensible as it is, that an all powerful, all knowing Being could have such conflicting emotions, this is without doubt the God whom the Bible reveals to us.

It has also been observed that in none of the flood myths is there anything like the table of nations of Gen. 10, which seeks to explain how the area affected by the flood was subsequently repopulated. However, the 70 peoples mentioned in Gen. 10 are clearly meant to be understood as representative of the wholeness of peoples. The point is being made that all tribal groups have one common origin, either in Adam or in one of Noah's sons. Remember that Moses was writing against a background of tribalism, where groups were persuaded that their group alone was the master race, and all foreigners were to be despised. The value of persons inspired by the Genesis record rose far above this petty tribalism. And for all our apparent sophistication, it's evident that our world is just as much full of tribalism as it ever was.

The Law In Life

Another striking difference between the Pentateuch and other contemporary legal codes is that those codes are straight codices of statutes; whereas God's law isn't like that. It is commandment interspersed between historical documents and incidents. We read of some incident in the wilderness journey, then we have some commandments recounted, then another incident, some more commandments, etc. This surely reflects how God intended obedience to His law to *not* be a legalistic exercise- it was a code for real human life, which should affect the very spirit of human existence in a way which no dry legal code really could. It was to set a rhythm of life, revealing how that law was "for our good always, that God might preserve us" (Dt. 6:24)- the person who obeyed the law was to live in it (Hab. 2:4 etc.). The motive for obedience to the law was not so that God might give them salvation or status as His people- it was precisely because He had done that, by grace, that they were to respond in obedience (Ex. 12:26; 13:8,14; Dt. 6:20).

Notes

(1) A good summary of them is to be found in S.G.F. Brandon, *Creation Legends Of The Ancient Near East* (London: Hodder & Staughton, 1963). Also worth referencing is the work of W.G. Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis", published in the *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 16 pp. 287-300.

(2) Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 126.

(3) Rafael Pettazzoni, *Myths of Beginning and Creation Myths in Essays On The History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1967) p. 32, and especially his *The All-Knowing God: Researches into Early Religion* (London: Methuen, 1956).

(4) S.N. Kramer, *Sumerian Literature and the Bible* (Rome: Pontificio Instituto Biblica, 1959) p.107.

(5) See R.E. Clements, *God And Temple* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965) p. 3; A.S. Kapelrud, *The Ras Shamra Discoveries And The Old Testament* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1965) p. 42; Peter Ackroyd, *Exile And Restoration* (London: S.C.M., 1968) p. 94.

(6) J. Skinner, *Commentary On Genesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956)

2.4 God sees and knows all things, being omnipresent and omnipotent by His Spirit.

No Secret Sins

Job knew this, and therefore, he commented, it was impossible that, e.g., he would lust after a woman, if he really believed (as he claimed he did) that God was omniscient. "Why then should I think upon a maid [as the friends implied he had done]?...doth not he [God] see my ways, and count all my steps?" (Job 31:4). Proverbs 5:20,21 makes the same warning against being "ravished with a strange woman", "For the ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord, and he pondereth all his goings". Also in the context of sexual sin, David could say that his awareness of his sin was 'ever before him' (Ps. 51:3); and also that he sensed God 'ever before him' (Ps. 16:8). A sense of the real presence of God leads us to an awareness of our sins. Likewise God had to remind Israel: "Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? Saith the Lord. Do not I fill heaven and earth?" (Jer. 23:24). The context is appealing to the people to quit their sins. We should labour to enter the Kingdom, *because* God knows absolutely every thought and action of ours and will ultimately judge them (Heb. 4:11-13). The Sermon on the Mount is really based around translating the knowledge that God sees and knows all things into practice. Our thoughts are equivalent to our actions; and yet often we think that the fact we are clever enough not to express them in action is somehow a lesser failure. And yet God sees our thought afar off. Realizing this will help us avoid the greatest danger in the religious life: to have an outward form of spirituality, when within we are dead. Brother Fred Barling commented: "What God loves is the man who is genuine through and through; in whom the "without" and the "within" are really one; whose dominant persuasion is, "Thou God seest me" ". Note how the Lord Jesus begins each of His letters to the ecclesias with the rubric: "I know..." ; His omniscience of His people ought to motivate to appropriate behaviour. His criticisms of those ecclesias imply that they *didn't* appreciate the fact that He knew them and their ways. Hannah had reflected upon God's omniscience; and on this basis she tells Peninah not to be proud and not to use hard words against her, exactly because of this: "Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not hardness [AVmg.] come out of your mouth: *for* the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed" here and now, *because* He sees and knows all things (1 Sam. 2:3).

The Hebrew language reflects certain realities about the nature of God's ways. The common Hebrew word for 'to see', especially when used about God's 'seeing', means also 'to provide'. Abraham comforted Isaac that "God will see for himself [AV 'provide'] the lamb" (Gen. 22:8 RVmg.); and thus the RVmg. interprets 'Jehovah-Jireh' as meaning 'the Lord will see, or provide' (Gen. 22:14). The same word is used when Saul asks his servants to "provide" him a man (1 Sam. 16:17). When Hagar said "Thou God seest me" (Gen. 16:13) she was expressing her gratitude for His *provision* for her. What this means in practice is that the fact God sees and knows all things means that He can and will therefore and thereby provide for us in the circumstances of life; for He sees and knows all things. Note that Prov. 28:27 and 29:7 RV speak of 'hiding the eyes' in the sense of not making provision for the need of

others. God's eyes are not hidden, and therefore He makes provision. Dt. 2:7 speaks of how God 'knew' Israel's journey through the wilderness, and therefore they "lacked nothing".

Motivation For Repentance

We may wonder why a chapter like Ezekiel 27 is full of such minute descriptions of Tyre, all leading up to God's pronouncement of judgment upon her. Surely the connection is in the fact that God's detailed knowledge of our lives, surroundings, interactions etc. should lead us to repentance. Not only our knowledge of God, but also His knowledge of us, makes us responsible to His judgment.

Openness With God

The fact God sees and knows all means that we might as well open our lives up before Him in prayer and meditation. Jeremiah "revealed my cause" before the Lord because he knew that God "triest the reins and the heart" (Jer. 11:20). This may be why men like Jeremiah were somewhat 'rough' with God; whatever they felt about God, they told Him. They so knew that God knew their thoughts....there was and is no point in saying fine words to God in prayer, whilst feeling harder about Him in ones heart. the Psalmists talk to God in a far 'rougher' way than we do. They pour out their feelings, their anger and frustration with their enemies, their inability to understand how God is working...and they let it all hang down. They seem to have no reserve with God; they talk to Him as if He is their friend and acquaintance. David pleads with God to 'avenge my cause' (Ps. 35:23), he protests how he is in the right and how he longs for God to judge him. And so do the prophets, in the interjections they sometimes make in commentary on the prophecy they have just uttered. The emotion which David often seems to have felt was "Damn these people!", but he pours this out to God and asks *Him* to damn them. When we like David feel our enemies are unjust, we can:

1. Seek revenge. But this isn't a response we can make, Biblically.
2. Deny the feelings of hurt and anger. And yet, they surface somehow. And we join the ranks of the millions of hurt people in this world, who 'take it out' in some way on others.
3. Or we can do as David seems to have done. Take these feelings, absolutely as they are, with no rough edges smoothed off them...to God Himself. Pour them all out in prayer and leave Him to resolve the matter. In passing, this fits in with the conclusions of modern psychiatry- that we can't eliminate our feelings, so we must express them in an appropriate way.

This latter option is how I understand the imprecatory Psalms. Those outpourings of human emotion were read by God as prayers, even though they appear somewhat contrary to the spirit of Christ. Indeed, when God commends Solomon for not asking for the lives of those who hate him, He appears to be indirectly critical of David's desire for just this (2 Chron. 1:11). The writer of Psalm 137, sitting angry and frustrated by a Babylonian riverside, with his harp hanging on a willow branch, being jeered ("tormented" Ps. 137:3 RVmg.) by the victorious Babylonian soldiers who had led him away captive...he felt *so* angry with them. Especially when they tried to make him sing one of the temple songs ("sing us one of the songs of Zion"). And, as a bitter man does, his mind went from one hurt to another. He remembered how when Babylon had invaded, the Edomites hadn't helped their Hebrew brethren (Obadiah 11,12). They had egged on the Babylonian soldiers in ripping down the

temple, saying " Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation" . And so in anger and bitterness this Jew prays with tears, as he remembered Zion, " O daughter of Babylon...happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the rock" (:8,9 RV). God read those angry words as a prayer, and in some sense they will have their fulfillment. For these words are picked up in Rev. 18:8,21 and applied to what will finally happen to Babylon. Her spiritual children will be dashed against the rock of Christ, the stone of Daniel 2:44, at His return. He will dash in pieces the Babylon-led people that oppose Him.

This makes these Psalms a challenge to us, in that they show how our earlier brethren poured out their souls, their anger, their doubts and fears, their joy and exuberance too...to the God who hears prayer, to the God who feels passionately for us, who feels for *our* feelings, *who sees and knows all things in the human heart*, even moreso through our Lord Jesus Christ. And we must ask whether our prayers are of this quality, or whether we have slipped into the mire of mediocrity, the same standard phrases, the same old words and themes... and even worse, could it be that we perceive that God only sees and hears the words we say to Him in formal prayer, and disregards our other feelings and thoughts? Seeing He sees and knows all things, let us therefore pour out all that is within us before Him. And we will find it wonderfully therapeutic when struggling against anger and hurt.

This openness with God is what must have lead some of the great heroes of faith to apparently openly question God. Jeremiah complains that Zion has no comforter (Lam. 1:9 RV)- in clear reference to the prophecies of Is. 40:1 that when Judah went into captivity, they would have a comforter. When Jeremiah complains that "The comforter that should refresh my soul is far from me" (Lam. 1:16) he is surely saying 'The prophesied comforter of Isaiah just simply hasn't come!'. He had his doubts- and he expresses them openly. Elisha likewise has an apparent roughness with the Almighty that could only surely come from his knowing that God fully viewed and knew his inner feelings. "Why should I wait for the Lord any longer?" (2 Kings 6:33 RV) expresses his exasperation, in words which are quite shocking to read- until we realize that our own hearts have probably harboured such basic feelings, even though never verbalized. The intimacy of other prophets with God is reflected in the roughness and familiarity which they sometimes use- take Ps. 44:23,24: "Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, Lord? Awake! Do not cast us off for ever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?".

Our Words

Jer. 17:10 says that God tests the kidneys as well as the heart- the emotions as well as the thoughts. This is quite something- for so often we justify our sin as being the inevitable grip of emotion, especially if we are angry in a sinful way. But God analyzes our emotions, as well as our thoughts... And it's especially sobering to reflect that God knows our words. Jer. 17:16 is translated by John Bright: "Ah, thou dost know! What my lips have said has been before thee", i.e. our words are presented before the court of Heaven itself. Our thoughts, emotions and words are all considered in detail by God. It's no good reasoning that control of our words is all that is required- for nicestpeak will not justify us to the God who also searches through our emotions and thoughts. The comfort is that He searches with grace and understanding.

Paul twice assures his readers that he speaks the truth because he is speaking in the sight / presence of God (2 Cor. 2:17; 12:19). The fact God is everywhere present through His Spirit,

that He exists, should lead us at the very least to be truthful. In the day of judgment, a condemned Israel will know that God heard their every word; but if we accept that fact now then we will be influenced in our words now. And by our words we will be justified (Ez. 35:12). Reflection upon the omniscience of God leads us to marvel at His sensitivity to human behaviour. He noticed even the body language of the women in Is. 3:16- and condemned them for the way they walked. This is how closely He observes human behaviour. Hannah tells Peninah not to talk so proudly because " the Lord is a God of knowledge, though actions be not weighed" , i.e. they are not judged immediately, but, they surely will be (1 Sam. 2:3 RVmg.).

Because God sees and knows absolutely all, we must recognize that He realizes the unspoken implications of our words. Job's words of repentance of Job 40:5 are seen by God as Job effectively condemning God, because presumably they were said merely as a mask over Job's inner feelings that God had been unjust with him (Job 40:8). But when Job uses effectively the same words in Job 42:6, God accepts them. God's ability to see to the core should therefore not only affect our words but elicit in us an honesty of heart behind the words which we use.

Honesty In Business

In the midst of a section of Proverbs exhorting us to being honest in business, using just weights and not pushing down the price of what you want to purchase, we read: "The hearing eye, and the seeing ear, the Lord hath made even both of them" (Prov. 20:12). Surely the point is that the Lord knows all things, as evidenced by His creation of our senses; and therefore we should be above board in all our dealings.

Motivation In Preaching

Paul says that he does not personally profit from his preaching, but in the sight of God does he preach (2 Cor. 2:17 RVmg.). Our motivation in preaching, whether it be to demonstrate intellectual prowess, or to sincerely save somebody, or merely to look good in the eyes of our brethren, is all weighed up; and so we must preach in the sight of God, knowing He watches.

Mindful of God

There is perhaps a purposeful ambiguity in the Hebrew text of Is. 44:21: " O Israel thou shalt not be forgotten of me" is rendered in the RVmg: " thou shouldest not forget me" . The fact God never forgets us should be inspiration to not forget Him in the daily round of life. To act as if God doesn't see all our ways is to effectively deny His existence. Babylon acted as she did because she reasoned that " None seeth me...I am, and there is none else beside me" (Is. 47:10 RV). They appropriated the language of God to themselves, they played God in that they thought their ways were unseen by any higher power. And we all have a terrible, frightening tendency to do this.

Humility

The fact that God's Angelic-eyes "observe us" should make us humble, not only mindful of how we behave. We are naked before Almighty God. Hence the proud should not exalt themselves, exactly because "His eyes observe the nations" (Ps. 66:7 RV).

Faith In Prayer

If God really does see and know all things, then He surely hears prayer. We raise our eyebrows when we read David's desperate prayer: "Be not thou deaf unto me" (Ps. 28:1 RV). He who made the ear shall surely hear. God of course isn't deaf- and just as surely and obviously, He will likewise hear prayer.

Trusting God's Judgment

"I am He that knoweth, and am witness", God claimed, in the context of speaking about His legal controversy with Judah (Jer. 29:23 RV). The fact He sees and knows all things has potent power when we remember that God is right now our judge, and also the one who has a legal case against sinners. Nobody can cleverly present the evidence to cover things over. In Zech. 3 we have a picture of Yahweh's court. God Himself weighs up human situations and gives a verdict. A figure called 'the devil', the accuser, is there. Now I've reasoned elsewhere that there is actually no personal being called 'the devil'. Rather I suggest this figure is a vehicle for showing us that God is aware of all aspects of any case that comes before Him. He takes into account every counter argument, in making His judgments. His Angelic "eyes" range or [Heb.] "scour" through the whole world to gather information (Zech. 4:10). Now of course God could simply decree what is right and be as it were automatically just. But He wishes us to understand that He does actually process each case, considering human objections to what He does and how He judges. Being God, He judges with the full knowledge of every possible reason and nuance and background factor. He considers the counter case. And so if e.g. someone is smitten with cancer- He has considered all the counter arguments in that case. We trust that God is the very essence of love, and means only our ultimate salvation in our latter end. He judges according to what I would call the ultimate algorithm, taking absolutely all possible futures and possible human moves into account. When you play chess against a computer, the program simply races ahead to consider all the millions of possible future outcomes of any move made, either by you or by the computer. God is infinitely above that, but it's perhaps a helpful analogy. Accepting this empowers us to accept God's decisions- even though in His love, some of those decisions are open to amendment by human prayer. It all leads us to reflect how we simply cannot ultimately judge- for we know and perceive so little of the myriad factors behind the behaviour of other humans. And yet the Zechariah 3 vision shows us Joshua the High Priest admitted to that Divine Council, as if God in His grace is willing to enter into a kind of power sharing with His people, considering our viewpoints and situations, just as He was willing to listen to men like Moses and Abraham in amending His decisions e.g. about Sodom and Israel.

2.5 God is omnipotent and from everlasting to everlasting

Really Believe That We Will Also Truly Live For Ever

See what Hab. 1:12 builds upon this: "Art thou not from everlasting, O Lord my God...? We shall [therefore] not die". If we truly believe that we are *His* people, not those of this world, and that we are truly part of His eternal family, then His eternity becomes a guarantee of our eternal salvation. David asked not to be "taken away" in death, reflecting as he did that "Thy years are throughout all generations" (Ps. 102:24). God's eternity inspires our faith in sharing that eternity.

Don't Judge Others

The omnipotence of God not only inspires faith; it demands even more than that. Because God alone has the power to save and destroy, He alone can ultimately judge; the fact there is only one law giver means there is only one judge (James 4:12 RV). To judge, therefore, is to 'play God' in a blasphemous way, arrogating to ourselves the role of lawgiver and judge. Yet apart from God we are powerless, totally and utterly. Our powerlessness needs to be reflected upon more deeply. We simply cannot judge. The omnipotence of God alone precludes it.

No Trust In Wealth

God has 'spoken twice', an idiom for Divine emphasis upon something, that all power belongs to Him, God is omnipotent- and exactly because of this, David says, we should not set our heart upon riches if they happen to increase (Ps. 62:10,11). As the world economy develops more and more wealth, increase in riches is a temptation which faces many believers, both relatively rich and relatively poor, in most countries of the world. I'd guess that well over 50% of Christians have experienced an increase in riches over the past 20 years. The temptation is of course to 'set our heart' upon them, and the illusion of freedom which increased wealth brings. This most insidious temptation, David says, can be overcome by a deep sense of how important it is to believe that *all* power is *of God alone*. This means that money is *not* equal to power; because all power is of God. Don't set your heart upon *money* because *power* is from God... these simple, inspired words dramatically torpedo this world's most crucial principle: that money = power. It doesn't. Quite simply, because all power is *of God*.

2.5.1 God Predestinates

Humility And Grace

An understanding of predestination helps us towards true humility and appreciation of grace. This is the very context in which Paul introduces the idea in Romans; he wished his readers to appreciate grace by reflecting upon how predestination involves something far over and above anything we could 'do' or 'be' in our own rights. Further, Paul speaks of predestination in Eph. 1:5,6, and says that it is a sign of God's grace- and thus we are "predestinated... to the praise of the glory of His grace". Predestination also brings with it an appreciation of grace, and real praise for it. Predestination by grace doesn't motivate to lethargy and fatalism- if it's properly understood. When the Lord speaks of how we have been chosen, above and beyond any effort on our part, He goes on to teach that exactly because of this, we have a responsibility to produce fruit, to pray, to love one another (Jn. 15:16,17). Despite predestination, there are countless thousands of freewill decisions for us to make each day. Try to bear that in mind some mornings as you wake up. Whatever situation we're in, life takes on an excitement and meaning and challenge. The simple fact of predestination, of having been chosen by grace, should radically inspire us in every one of those freewill decisions. The true Biblical idea of predestination mustn't be confused with non-Biblical ones. The Romans, Greeks, Egyptians etc. all believed that they had been elected by the gods, predestined to be the special race that alone had true connection with the divine... but they assumed this predestination was because of their natural superiority. Biblical predestination is radically different- that the weak are chosen and the strong rejected, not because they are smart, beautiful, hard working, successful, lucky... but exactly because they are weak and just who they are. This is the grace of true predestination. And it's so

wonderful that nobody can be passive to it. On this very basis, Paul urges Euodia and Syntyche to resolve their differences because their names were written in the book of life (Phil. 4:2,3). That book was written from the foundation of the world, and the fact our names are written in it is a reference to the concept of predestination. This reality means that in practice we simply shouldn't be at loggerheads with others who share in that same grace of predestination!

Don't Be Vindictive

Joseph had the same basic understanding. He held no grudge against his brethren, and would not be vindictive to them, because he understood something of predestination: "You *meant* evil against me; but God *meant* it for good" (Gen. 50:20). And because he understood that God's good intentions were worked out through the evil intentions of others, Joseph was content to leave all in God's hands, and on *this basis* he assures his brothers that given his understanding of this 'predestination', he wouldn't hit back at them for what they'd done to him. The Lord spoke of the coming of His 'hour' of death as if it were somehow predestined of the Father. But His appreciation of this didn't lead to a mere fatalism, but rather to a heightened sense of the importance of obedience, of playing His part in the Father's drama to the best of His ability (Jn. 7:6,8; 12:23,27). Joab likewise, when facing a battle against a hugely superior army, commented: "Let the Lord do that which is good in his sight" (1 Chron. 19:13)- but this bred not fatalism but rather a zealous attempt to fight for the Lord, which God blessed with victory.

Never Forgotten

We all struggle at times with feeling forgotten. Yet if we were predestinated, known before the foundation of the world, God has actually remembered us throughout the infinity of time which has passed since 'the beginning'. Why should He forget us now? The fact of predestination and the foreknowledge which is part of it should therefore comfort us that never, ever, are we forgotten by Him. And so what, therefore, if others forget us, if we fade from their scenes, our families no longer need us, scarcely give us a call... for the God who never forgot us since the beginning, will not forget us now. Indeed every moment of our living now is in some way a climax of His long planned purpose for us, which took the development of millennia of genes to achieve the unique creation which is you. Putting this more theologically, Paul Tillich wrote: "Is there anything that can keep us from being forgotten? That we were known from eternity and will be remembered in eternity is the only certainty that can save us... we cannot be forgotten, because we are known eternally, beyond past and future" (1).

Notes

(1) Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Scribner's, 1963) p. 25.

2-6-1 God Is One, And There Is Only One Lord Jesus

A Demand For Our All

That God is one is not just a numerical description. If there is only one God, He therefore demands our *all*. Because He is the One God, He demands all our worship; and because He is One, He therefore treats all His people the same, regardless, e.g., of their nationality (Rom. 3:30). All true worshippers of the one God, whether Jew or Gentile, are united in that the one God offers salvation to them on the same basis. The fact there is only one Lord Jesus implies the same for Him (Rom. 10:12). Paul saw these implications in the doctrine of the unity of God. But that doctrine needs reflecting on before we come to grasp these conclusions. Christ taught that the command that God was one and therefore we must love God *included* the second command: to love our neighbour as ourselves. The first and second commands were in fact one command; they were inseparably part of the first commandment (Mk. 12:29-31). This is why the 'two' commandments, to love God and neighbour, are spoken of in the singular in Lk. 10:27,28: " *this* do..." . If God is one, then our brother bears the one Name of God, and so to love God is to love our brother (cp. 1 Jn. 4:21). And because there is only one God, this demands *all* our spiritual energy. There is only one, the one God, who seeks glory for men and judges them (Jn. 8:50)- therefore the unity of God should mean we do not seek glory of men, neither do we judge our brother.

That God is one is a command, an imperative to action (Mk. 12:28,29). It underlies the whole law and prophets (Mt. 22:40)- it's that fundamental. If there were two Gods, Yahweh would only demand half our energies. Nothing can be given to anything else; for there is nothing else to give to. There's only one God. There can be no idolatry in our lives, because there is only one God (2 Kings 19:18,19). Because " there is none else, thou shalt keep *therefore* his statutes" (Dt. 4:39,40). The Hebrew text of Dt. 6:4 suggests: " The Lord is our God, the Lord is one" , thereby linking Yahweh's unity with His being our God, the sole Lord and unrivalled Master of His people. It also links the first principle of the unity of God with that of the covenant to Abraham; for " I will be their God" was one of the features of the covenant. The one God has only one people; not all religious systems can lead to the one Hope of Israel.

Dt. 6:4 is far more than a Sunday School text. Indeed God is one; but consider the context. Moses has set the people up to expect him to deliver them a long list of detailed commands; he has told them that God told him to declare unto them " all the commandments...that they may do them...ye shall observe to do therefore as the Lord your God hath commanded you...ye shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God hath commanded you...now these are the commandments...that ye might do them...*hear therefore O Israel and observe to do it* [singular]..." . Now we expect him to reel off a long list of commands. But Moses mirrors that last phrase with simply: " *Hear, O Israel*, the Lord our God is one" (Dt. 5:31-6:4). And in this context he gives no other commandments. " Observe to do *it* " is matched with " The Lord our God is one" . This is the quintessence of all the commands of God. And he goes straight on to say: " And these words...shall be in thine heart" and they were to talk of them to their children in the house and by the way, bind them upon their hands and on the posts of their homes. Some Jewish traditions, perhaps correctly, place the *shema*, " Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one" in their phylacteries. And this is indeed the context. It was the unity of God and the imperative from it to love Him with all the heart which is what was to be programmatic for their daily living. This is why it was Jewish practice to recite the *shema* several times a day, and also on their deathbed. Dt. 6:1 RV reads: " Now this is *the commandment* [singular], the statutes and the judgments...the Lord our God is one" . And then they are told to write the statutes on their door posts etc. It would have been hard to literally write all 613 of them there. Yet the whole way of life for Israel was epitomized in the single command...that God is one. It was and is a *command*; not a mere statement; and it was this they were to speak to their children about and continually meditate upon. Thus the unity

of God is even today a summary of all God's desires and requirements for us, that He should be the one and only in our lives, with all this means in practice. The Jewish zealots who died at Massada had as their battle cry " the Lord our God is one!" , and some time later Rabbi Akiba was flayed alive by the Romans, crying as the skin was stripped from his bones: " The Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" [\(1\)](#). And there are many accounts from the Holocaust of similar things.

We do not have two masters; only one. Therefore, the more we grasp this, the more we will give ourselves solely to Him. And this leads on, in the thinking of Jesus, to having no anxious thought for tomorrow; for a life of total devotion to Him means that we need not worry about tomorrow (Mt. 6:24,25). If we seek first His Kingdom, then we will not be anxious for tomorrow (Mt. 6:33,34).

No Idolatry

There is a religious impulse within all men, a desire to serve someone or something. Generally, men and women sink this in the worship of the many idols of this materialistic age. But for us, there is to be one God, one channel alone for our devotion; for God is one. When Israel rejected the fountain of Yahweh, they hewed out many other fountains, in the form of idols (Jer. 2:13). The urge to worship is there within all men and women. We are asked to concentrate and consecrate that passion solely for the one God- not to share it between the many things that demand it. Romans 1 goes so far as to condemn men because they worshipped the created things *besides* (Gk.) the creator. *All* their adoration should have gone to the one God Himself. And there will come a day when all the world realizes that God is one (Is. 37:20 Heb.)- in that they will realize that He alone is God and all else is pure vanity. Because God alone is holy, only He will be worshipped then (Rev. 15:4). " The Lord alone shall be exalted in that day" (Is. 2:11,17).

Our brethren have often and so rightly pointed out to us that we are just as much at risk from idolatry as were Israel. Our worlds, our lives and hearts, are full of potential idols. And what, in the most fundamental essence, is wrong with idolatry? It seems to me that idolatry *trivializes* this wonderful God of whom we have spoken. It makes the Almighty Jehovah of Israel into a piece of wood or stone, or into a smart career or new house. And so *anything* that reduces the majesty, the surprise, the passion, the vitality in our relationship with God is an idol. Time and again in our lives, God is edged out by petty distractions- a car that needs repair, a leaking gutter, a broken window. One could almost weep for the frequency and the way in which all this occurs, so tragically often.

Even under the Law, " Ye shall have one manner of law, as well for the stranger as for one of your own country: *for I am Yahweh your God*" (Lev. 24:22). The inclusiveness of Yahweh of His people, the nature of who His Name reveals Him to be, should of itself have led Israel to not discriminate against other races. Because Yahweh *is* who He is, therefore we must be like Him; His very existence and being demands it of us (Lev. 20:7 cp. 19:2, 10). If we really know the characteristics implicit in His Name, we will put our trust in Him (Ps. 9:10; 124:8). If we see / know God in the experiential sense, we will do no evil (3 Jn. 11). To have the true knowledge of Jesus Christ means we will not be barren [Gk. 'idle'] nor unfruitful (2 Pet. 1:8). When Zacharias wanted to have grounds for faith, he was simply told: " I am Gabriel..." , the man like God (Lk. 1:19). The declaration of God's Name in Ex. 34:6,7 doesn't include statements like 'Trust in God! He'll help you!'. Instead we read of the grace, mercy, justice and inevitable judgment of God. Knowing and experiencing these more abstract things will

lead us to a practical faith in God. Because David remembered God's Name, *therefore* He kept His law (Ps. 119:55 RSV). This is why the Bible uses the idea of 'knowing' God in the sense of knowing Him by experience, not just 'knowing' the right theory. Likewise John uses 'the truth' in the sense of not just correct knowledge but the way of life it brings forth.

The "high places" of Israel are typically associated in the prophets with idol worship. But in Is. 2:14 they are spoken of as places of pride which needed to be brought down. There is therefore a connection between idolatry and pride; believing in one God is associated with no idolatry and thereby humility.

Faith

The unity of God is related to His sovereign power in our lives: " He is one [and therefore] what his soul desireth, even that he doeth. For he performeth that which is appointed" (Job 23:13,14 RVmg.). The idea of truth is often linked with the fact there is only one God (Is. 45:5,6,14,18,21,22). This means that all He says is the total Truth; for there is no other God. Thus one God has given us only one faith, hope etc (Eph. 4:4-6). Other belief systems can't be acceptable with us. And it also follows that as James points out, faction amongst true believers is a lie against " the Truth" . If we deeply believe it, these factions we experience would not occur. It's as simple as that. Such was the crucial importance of the unity of God; and likewise it should influence our lives, hourly. It is thereby so so evident that those who do not believe in one God are far from God not only in their intellectual understanding but also in their living.

David had to remind himself: " My soul, wait thou only upon God [one-ly upon the one God]; for my expectation is from him [i.e. Him alone]" (Ps. 62:5). There is only one God, one source of help and power- and thus the oneness of God inspires our faith in Him. This motivated Asa to cry unto Yahweh in faith: " LORD, there is none beside thee to help...help *us* , O LORD...for we rely on thee, and in thy name" (2 Chron. 14:11 RV). Summing up, James 2:14-18 speaks of the connection between *faith* (believing) and *works* (doing). It is no co-incidence that 2:19 then says in this context: " Thou *believest* that God is one; thou *doest* well" (RV). To have *faith* in the unity of God will lead to *works*, 'doing well'.

Prayer

God would not be inquired of by Israel, i.e. He would not answer their prayers, because they worshipped other gods, whereas God is one (Ez. 20:31). Prayer and wholeheartedly requesting things from the one God, relying on nothing and nobody else, is thus a form of worship of the one God. If we are truly believing in one God, then we shouldn't feel awkward about asking Him for things- it's a form of worshipping Him.

Witness To The World

Two related themes keep recurring in the latter half of Isaiah: the unity of God, and the idea that Israel are to be a witness to the whole world. The fact there is only one God, there is no local 'god' existing to care for each nation on earth, sets up an amazing potential for unity- in that all the world should be taught of that one God and become His, and thereby in fellowship with each other. And those who believe that there is only one God should be out there in this world seeking to bring others to Him.

Unity

Paul, writing to those who thought they believed in the unity of God, had to remind them that this simple fact implies the need for unity amongst us His children, seeing He treats us all equally as a truly good Father: "If so be that God is one...he shall justify the circumcision by faith, and [likewise] the uncircumcision through faith" (Rom. 3:30 RV). Unity amongst us is inspired by the fact that God seeks to be one with us, exactly because He is Himself 'unity', one in Himself. The Rabbis have always been at pains to point out the somewhat unusual grammar in the record of creation in Genesis 1, which literally translated reads: "One day... a second day... a third day", rather than 'One day... two days... three days', as we'd expect if 'Day one' solely referred to 'firstness' in terms of time. "The first day" (Gen. 1:5) therefore means more strictly 'the day of unity', in that it refers to how the one God sought unity with earth. "*Yom ehad*, one day, really means the day which God desired to be *one* with man... the unity of God is a concern for the unity of the world" (2).

Notes

(1) See L. Finkelstein, *Akiba: Scholar, Saint and Martyr* (New York: Athenaeum, 1975) p. 277.

(2) Abraham Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979) p. 123.

2-6-2 The Unity Of God

There is no doubt that one of the major aims of Christianity is to develop a mind which is fixed upon the Lord Jesus. Yet because of the nature of God manifestation, this means that in some ways we have to consider both God, with whom Christ was and is one in spirit, and also the body of Christ; for we are also one with Christ, as He is one with God (Jn. 17:21). Thus the act of breaking bread is not *just* a statement of our relationship with the Lord Jesus (although of course it is that); it has meaning in terms of our relationship with God too. It is a re-affirmation of our covenant with Him, fulfilling the types of some of the Mosaic sacrifices, which spoke of a man's relationship and commitment to God the Father. So whilst we must ever grow in our appreciation of the unity between Christ and the Father, the supremacy of God's manifestation in Him, we must not let this drive out our awareness of both the Father and our brethren and sisters, the body of Christ.

I want to consider the teaching of Mark 12:28-31. Jesus was asked which was the first (i.e. the most important) commandment; we would expect Him to just recite one of them, and to say 'Well, there you are, that's my answer; that's the first one, either numerically, or in terms of importance'. But in reply to this request to name just one of the ten commandments, He actually quotes two of them. "Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. (Now notice this bit) *There is none other commandment greater than these* ". There is no greater command (singular) than these *two* . So Jesus saw those two commands as one, the greatest, most important principle of our life before God. Yet He begins by speaking of the unity of God as expressed in His memorial Name, Yahweh your elohim, and says that *this* is what will lead to us loving God with all we have, and also to our loving our neighbour as ourselves. The Lord is saying that if we really appreciate this idea of the unity of God, that

Yahweh is our God, then we will *therefore* love God, and also our neighbour. So what does it mean, to love our neighbour as ourselves? In the context of the Decalogue, the neighbour of the Israelite would have been his fellow Israelite, not the Gentile who lived next door to him. The command to love our neighbour as ourselves is elsewhere given an equivalent under the new Covenant: to love our brother or sister in the ecclesia as ourselves. Gal. 5:14 and James 2:8 quote this command in the context of ecclesial life.

So to love God and Christ is to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is because of the intense unity of God's Name. Because our brethren and sisters share God's Name, as we do, we must love them as ourselves, who also bear that same Name. And if we love the Father, we must love the Son, who bears His Name, with a similar love. The letters of John state this explicitly. If we love God, we *must* love our brother; and if we love the Father, we *must* love the Son. This is why we must honour the Son as we honour the Father (Jn. 5:23); such is the unifying power of God's Name. So the Father, Son and church are inextricably connected. Baptism into the name of Christ is therefore baptism into the Name of the Father, and associates us with the "one Spirit" (Mt. 28:19; Eph. 4:4). In the same way as we cannot choose to live in isolation from the Father and Son, so we cannot separate ourselves from others who bear the same Name. The Scribe well understood all this: "There is one God...and to love him...and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mk. 12:32,33). Those whole offerings represented the whole body of Israel (Lev. 4:7-15). The Scribe understood that those offerings taught that all Israel were unified together on account of their bearing the same Name of Yahweh. We must love others who bear that Name "as ourselves", so intense is the unity between us. In some ways, we should lose the sense of our own human personality; we should somehow be able to have the same spiritual interest in others (for this is true love) as we do for ourselves. So this sense of true selflessness which we would dearly desire is connected with an appreciation of the doctrine of the intense unity of God and of His Name, and of the glorious principle of God manifestation. By sharing the one Name, we are one together. 1 Jn. 3:23 associates believing on the Name with loving each other; and in Jn. 17:11 Christ prays that God will keep us all as one *through His own Name*. If you get hold of one of the Bible analysis programs on a computer, you can find all the places where God's Name is associated with unity. There are so many of them. Quite often God's Name is connected with His being "the Holy *One*" (Is. 29:23; 47:4; 54:5; 57:15; 60:9; Ez. 39:7). God being the Holy *One* is a further statement of His unity ⁽¹⁾. Of course, we are speaking of ideal things. False doctrine and practice, the uncertainty of knowing exactly who carries God's Name, these and many other limitations of our humanity make it hard to achieve the unity which this theory speaks of. But the unity we do achieve is a foretaste of the Kingdom; unless we *love* this idea of unity, we will find ourselves out of place in the Kingdom. "In *that day* there shall be one Lord, and His Name one" (Zech. 14:9). It may well be that Eph. 4:4-6 is alluding back to this verse; this passage inspires us to keep the unity of the Spirit, because here and now "there is one body, and one Spirit...*one Lord* ...one baptism, one God"; in other words, Paul is saying that the unity of the Kingdom, as spoken of in Zech. 14:9, must be found in the ecclesia of today.

It's so easy to write these words, to read of these things. But do we really believe that we, and our brethren, do really bear this glorious and fearful Name? If we do, we will be meeting with them as far as possible, travelling to meetings, thinking of them in our daily work, writing to them, fervently praying for them, doing all we can to mend breaches between us, overcoming the selfishness of indifference, *loving our brethren as we do ourselves*. Now here is something to rise up to, to shake us out of the polemics, the academics, the spiritual indifference, which can come to fill much of our spiritual lives. *All* the fullness of God dwelt

in Christ (Col. 1:19; 2:9); " and of his fullness have *all* we received" (Jn. 1:16). God's fullness, the full extent of His character, dwelt in Christ, and through His Name which speaks fully of that character, that fullness of Christ is reckoned to us. And so, in line with all this, Eph. 3:19 makes the amazing statement. And it is amazing. We can *now* " be filled with *all* the fullness of God" . Let's underline that, really underline it, in our hearts. We can be *filled* with *all* the fullness of God. Filled with all the fullness of God's character. Our poor, small, limited minds try to rise out of their spiritual squalor to get a handle on this.

There is a clear connection between this idea of the fullness of God, and Ex. 34:6, where God proclaims His Name to be " Yahweh, a God *full* of compassion" , grace and His other characteristics (see R.V.). So by bearing God's Name, we have His fullness counted to us. As Christ had the fullness of God dwelling in Him in a bodily form (Col. 2:9), so the church, as the body of Christ, " *is* (Christ's) body, the fullness of him (God) that filleth all in all" (Eph. 1:22,23). So you see the intensity of our unity; we *are* the very body of Christ, He exists in and through us (although of course He still has a separate personality). Likewise, the *fullness* of God is in Christ and thereby in us. We are not just one part of God's interest, our salvation is not just one of His many hobbies, as it were. He only has one beloved Son; He was sent to this earth for *our* salvation. The fullness of God, even though we scarcely begin to comprehend it, dwelt fully in Christ, and is counted to us. We really should have a sense of wonder, real wonder, at the greatness of our calling. How *can* we be so indifferent to it? How can we be prepared to enter so little into the depths of these things, when God's word is so full of His self-revelation, that we might *know* His Name. Ps. 91:14 implies that our love of God is expressed in seeking to appreciate His name:

" Because he hath set his love upon me therefore will I deliver him:

because he hath known my name I will set him on high" .

To know Him is to love Him, and to want to be like Him; there is something compulsive and magnetic about who He is. The knowledge of God elicits quite naturally a merciful spirit (Hos. 6:6). To "learn righteousness" is the result of beholding [after the pattern of Moses] the majesty of the Name (Is. 26:10). And so Is. 46:5-9 appeals for Israel to repent simply because God really is God; they were to "remember this" that they already knew, and "bring it again to mind" that God is really the great eternal, and His Name is as it is. And they that know His Name will put their trust in Him, day by day, as we cough and hack our way through these few years towards His eternal Kingdom. Then God will be " all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28), through the full expression of His Name. But Eph. 1:23 says that right now, *all* the fullness of God fills " all in all" in the church; in other words we should now be experiencing something of that total unity which will then be physically manifest throughout all creation.

The intense degree to which God's Name really is called upon us is brought out in Is. 64:4. There we are told that no man has perceived " O God, *beside Thee*" what has been prepared for the saints. These words are quoted in 1 Cor. 2:9,10 concerning us, with the wondrous statement that God has revealed these things to us by His Spirit. Yet Is. 64:4 says that *only God alone* knows these things. But Paul says that they are also known by us, through God's Spirit. So through our association with the one Spirit, the one Name of Yahweh, what is true of God Himself on a personal level becomes true of us. Such is the wonder of the way in which His *fullness* dwells in us. God's Name *alone* is Yahweh (Ps. 83:18), yet this Name is now called upon us.

Such was the Lord's unity with us then that He personally carried our sins, He was so deeply connected with us and our sinfulness that He had to offer for His own salvation " that it might be for us" . Robert Roberts goes on (in *The Blood of Christ*) to make the point that it is impossible to separate Christ from the work He came to do; there was no effective division between the work He did for Himself, and that which He did for us. The same spirit is found in the encouragement to the Christian husband to sacrifice himself in every way for the wife's salvation. It was shown by the good Samaritan (cp. Jesus) risking his own safety to save the wounded man of humanity; the shepherd stumbling about in the dark mountains looking for the lost sheep of the church; and also by Moses, when he was willing to risk his own salvation for that of others (Ex. 33:32). He really understood the spirit of unity which we are speaking about. He wanted to see God's glory, whether it was manifest in him or others was to some degree irrelevant. This is a great challenge for us. Our attitude to rejection at the judgment should be that if we personally cannot glorify God's Name, then we hope for rejection and destruction, as quickly as possible. We should wish to see our brother saved *every bit as much* as we wish for our own salvation; this is loving our neighbour as ourselves.

We have spoken of theory. We have looked to the heights of idealism. After reading this you will, in a few hours, at most, be back in the real world of sin and failure, of apparent inability to attain even the smallest ideals. But the very height of these things should itself be like a great crane, to lift us up from our lowness. We *can* capture some sense of this " all in all" presence of God in our lives, we *can* grapple with our own self-centredness, the Truth really can permeate our thinking- if we let it, if we do our part to saturate our thinking with His word, to fill our lives with behaviour patterns and habits which allow us to live out this unity of which we have been speaking.

Notes

(1) Perhaps Jesus was referring to this in Jn. 17:11: " *Holy* Father, keep through thine own *Name* those whom thou hast given me, that they may be *one* " . In this case, Jesus is implying: 'Help them to be one, so that they might all come together with me as well in the Name of the Holy One of Israel'.

2.7 God's Name is Yahweh / Jehovah / Yahoovah.

(Note: The exact pronunciation isn't vital. The meaning of the name rather than its pronunciation is the essence. It is likely that the correct form would be something like Yahoo-wah, including the essence of the three forms of the Hebrew verb 'to be'- past, present and future (1).

The Hebrew idea of a name is connected with the idea of who a person essentially is. In Biblical Hebrew, one would enquire after a person's literal name by asking "Who (*mi*) are you?"- not, as was asked of Jacob, "What (*mah*) is your name?" (Gen. 32:28). This question to Jacob was therefore a request for him to ask himself who he really was. God's Name in this sense is to become part of ours- hence after God's declaration of His Name to Moses, the Israelites started to insert parts of the Yah / Jeh name into their own. Interestingly, there's hardly any example of this being done before the time of Moses, with the possible exception of Moses' own mother Jochebed / Yahhebed ['Yah is weighty'; Ex. 6:20]. Perhaps her parents had perceived this, or maybe she herself did, and thus Moses was almost genetically set up to receive the revelation of Yahweh's Name because his own mother had meditated upon it. Incidentally, the use of the name 'Jochebed' shows that the YHWH Name was known before

the time of Ex. 6:3. "By my name YHWH was I not known to them?" needs to be read as a question, not a statement that the Name was unknown to anyone before the time of Moses.

To the Semitic peoples, a name stands for the essential identity of a person; to know their name gives access to the power and authority which they have. This is why Moses is so urgent to know God's Name (Ex. 3:13,14). Insofar as we grasp and absorb into ourselves the principles of that Name, we likewise will be empowered by the Father. The Name of God is essentially an epitomy of who God is. God declared His Name to Moses when He declared His attributes to Him. This means that all that God is, we must be. Our attitudes to God are therefore related to our views about God. If we are impure, then we are saying that effectively God is impure- thus God rebukes Israel for having unjust weights: "Shall I be pure with wicked balances?" (Mic. 6:11 RV). We make God effectively impure by our being impure. Especially will our attitude to talking with God in prayer be affected by our view of who God is. If we consider Him to be inflexible, insisting that *His* will be done over and above our will, then there will be no sense of struggle in prayer, no grasp of the frightening reality that prayer does change things, with all this implies from us in terms of continuance and struggle in prayer. Ps. 44:20,21 state that to remember the Name of God takes place in the secret places of the heart. To remember the Name doesn't mean to remember that oh yes, His Name is 'Yahweh'. We remember the Name in the secret heart- it's such a personal thing. God will search the secret heart to see if we have forgotten the Name or whether those principles still affect our walk. For the things of the Name affect our lives and thinking to the very core. The Lord Jesus fed off the majesty of the Name of Yahweh (Mic. 5:4)- this was how inspirational He found the things of the Name. To fear the Name of Yahweh was to "observe to do all the words of this law" (Dt. 28:58). Meditation and sustained reflection upon the characteristics of God as epitomized and memorialized in His Name will of itself lead to a conformation of personality to that same Name. If we declare that Name to others, they too have the chance to be transformed by it- thus Moses comments: "Because *I* will publish the name of the Lord, ascribe *ye* greatness unto our God" (Dt. 32:3).

As a caveat to our rightful emphasis upon the need to correctly know doctrine about God, let's remember 1 Cor. 8:2,3: " If one thinks he knows, he has not yet known anything as he ought to know; but if one loves God, one is known by Him" . In other words, we will never know God to perfection in this life; but what we can be sure of and rejoice in is that *He knows us*. Paul almost implies that we can easily forget this wondrous fact, because of our obsession with wanting to fully know about *Him*.

The Reason For Praise

There is a link between the name Yahweh, and praise. Halle-lu-YAH is saying that for the sake of the Name Yah, *therefore* praise Him. David sat down and designed musical instruments because of the Name (2 Chron. 7:6). The Psalms often make the link explicit, e.g. " ...give thanks unto Thy holy name, and to triumph in Thy praise" (Ps. 106:47). The Name and praise are paralleled. If we know the beauty and wonder of God's Name, His very being, this is of itself an imperative to praise. He alone is worthy of praise because His Name alone is exalted (Ps. 148:13). "Because I will publish the name of the Lord: ascribe ye [therefore] greatness unto our God" (Dt. 32:3). As His Name is, so is His praise world-wide (Ps. 48:10); beyond the barriers of distance and language, those who know the Name are united in praise. Is. 42:8 speaks as if God's Name is itself His praise, so strong and inevitable is the link between knowing His Name and praising it: " I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images" . " Give unto the Lord the

glory due unto his name" (Ps. 29:2) suggests that the Name of Yahweh demands praise from us. To simply declare the Name is of itself to praise (Heb. 2:12). This explains why at least 15 times in the Psalms and often elsewhere, praise is to be given to God's Name (Ps. 7:17; 9:2; 44:8; 54:6; 61:8; 69:30; 74:21; 99:3; 113:1; 135:1; 138:2; 142:7; 145:2; 148:5,13; 149:3). And it also explains why acceptable worship involves having true doctrinal understanding of God (Mk. 7:7). There are similar links between glory and praise.

We read often that Yahweh *is* who His Name declares Him to be- and therefore He should be praised (e.g. Ps. 92:1). This is saying far more than 'His Name is Yahweh therefore praise this "Yahweh"'. That would be some sort of tautology, praise for the sake of praise. Rather the root of the praise is to be found in the fact that Yahweh really *is* who His Name declares Him to be- unlike so many Israelites, who never lived up to the great things their names declared of them. There is a congruence between who God says He is, and how we find Him to be. And this congruence is so great that He must be praised because of it.

Who God is, the nature of His Name of Yahweh, of itself inspires our worship. This is important; for we become what we worship (Jer. 2:5). Those who worship idols become like them; and those who worship the true God for all that He is, was and will be, become like Him. This is why worship and the appreciation of Him that underpins it is crucial for every true believer. We have often observed that first principles are all linked in with each other. Because "I am Yahweh", "the word that I speak shall come to pass" (Ez. 12:25). Because He is, and He *will be*, therefore the words of the 'I will be', really will be. Thus when Israel saw [and see] God's word fulfilled in their experiences, they will know that He is Yahweh- that this God who spoke really will be. Those who refused to believe that God's word of judgment against sin would truly be fulfilled are spoken of as those who "have belied YAHWEH, and said, It is not he" (Jer. 5:12). This is a clear reference to the fact Yahweh means 'I will be / I am'. To doubt His word in practice is to belie His very Name and being. This is why God assures us of the certainty of both His salvation and also His judgment of sin by saying that "As I live, saith Yahweh..." (Ez. 20:31,33; Is. 49:18; Num. 14:21). As surely as He who is, really is, so surely His words of promise and judgment will be fulfilled. His Name therefore confirms the reality of His words. David reflects upon the link between God's Name and His word in Ps. 138:2: "I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth: for thou hast magnified thy word above ['by'] all thy name". God's word is magnified by the Name, and vice versa- for David praises the Name on account of the mercy and truth revealed in the word, perhaps, specifically, the promises to Abraham ['lovingkindness / mercy and truth' are often used about these]. Because of all this, the Yahweh Name is the most essential challenge to faith. "I *will be*" is a challenge to believe that what is not yet seen *will be* on the basis of what has been and what is. We must trust / believe in the Name of Yahweh (Is. 50:10).

"Hallowed be your name" isn't merely an ascription of praise- it's actually a request for God to carry out all the implications of His Name in practice. When we sing praise to God's Name, we ask for it to be glorified- and here is where praise isn't mere painless performance of music. Once we bring the Name of God into it, we're actually asking for action in our lives. Jesus Himself prayed that part of His model prayer- "Father, glorify your name" (Jn. 12:28)- and soon afterwards He could comment that in His death, "Now the Son of man is glorified, and in him God is glorified" (Jn. 13:31). Thus in the Lord's case, a request to glorify God's Name lead Him ultimately to the cross.

Motivation To Labour

The fact God's Name is carried by us, the righteousness of it imputed to us, should lead us to a greater awareness of His grace. Paul alludes to how he carried the Yahweh Name when he says that "by the grace of God *I am what I am*" (1 Cor. 15:10). And his response was therefore to labour abundantly. A theme of Malachi is that Israel failed to appreciate God's Name of Yahweh, and *therefore* they were half-hearted in their service. They gave the minimum to God, they were partial in their generosity, because they despised His Name. The fullness and richness of the Name, of who God is, a God *full* of grace and truth (Ex. 34:6 RV), should lead us to a fullness of response. For the sake of the Name, believers labour (Rev. 2:13). To know the name of Yahweh is an imperative to serve Him (1 Chron. 28:9). The greatness of the Name should have led to full and costly sacrifices (Mal. 1:6-8,9-11,14; 2:2). Thinking upon the Name led the faithful to pay their tithes and fellowship with each other (Mal. 3:6,10). Giving unto Yahweh the glory due to His Name is articulated through giving sacrifice (Ps. 96:8). If we know God, we will act and judge as He does (Jer. 22:16). To perceive that Yahweh is indeed so righteous results in us humbling ourselves (2 Chron. 12:6), just as the declaration of the Name made Moses hide in the cleft of the rock, and as it will make men in the last days throw away all their vestige of human pride (Is. 2).

There are a few NT references to the Yahweh Name ⁽²⁾. One of them is in Heb. 11:6: he who comes to God must first [most importantly] believe that *He is* [a reference to He who is who He is, and will be who He will be], and that therefore, as an intrinsic part of who He is, *He is* a rewarder of His people. Surely the point is that it's not just knowing the Name theoretically, it is to believe it- that He who is, really *is* in our lives. Who God *is*, i.e. His Name, is an imperative to be like Him. If we are His sons and daughters, who He is becomes quite naturally the law of our being. Thus we should love our enemies, because God makes *His* sun [cp. 'our' goodness] to rise on both His friends and enemies. As we reflect on the massive power that every moment works to move the sun and earth around each other, so every moment we have an imperative to love. This is why belief in God cannot be merely an intellectual act occurring within certain brain cells. Belief means action in some way. Belief *and* the act of baptism are necessary for salvation; but some NT passages speak as if faith alone saves. This is reconciled by understanding that faith, true faith, includes works. James reasons that there is no distinction between true faith and works. They are part of the same nexus. Thus when we read in the NT of belief in Christ, the normal construction with a dative case was dropped and instead a preposition is used with the verb- belief *into* Christ is the idea, with implied reference to baptism *into* Him and an active life *in Him* as a result of our belief. To be brethren in Christ is not to just believe Christ or God, but to believe *into* them in practice. R.T. Lovelock comments: "The NT writers felt the importance of this utter trust in God so strongly, that they originated a new construction in their language to emphasise the concept and force it upon the attention of their readers" ⁽³⁾.

Repentance

Repentance is elicited by an appreciation of God's Name of Yahweh. Joel appealed: "Rend your heart...and turn to the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy" (Joel 2:13)- alluding clearly to the declaration of the Name in Ex. 34. *Because* of how God is, as revealed in His Name of Yahweh, because mercy and forgiveness are paramount within the texture of His very personality...therefore, repent. Thus Asaph prayed: "Help us...purge away our sins, for thy name's sake" (Ps. 79:9). Reflection on the Name inspired his faith in forgiveness and thus helped his repentance. It did the same for David (Ps. 25:11) and for Jeremiah (Jer. 14:7,21).

"What doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve [Him]" (Dt. 10:12) is the basis of Mic. 6:8: "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" . "To love [God]" is paralleled with "to love mercy" . If we love God, we will be merciful as He is. To know Him in truth is to actively be like Him. As God giveth to all men richly, so we should be rich in good works and sharing to others (1 Tim. 6:17,18). The fear or worship of Yahweh is paralleled with "to depart from evil" (Job 28:28); one cannot know / fear Him and remain in the ways of sin. "Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel. For...Yahweh, the Lord of hosts, is his name" (Am. 4:12,13). Who God is, as expressed in His Name, is an imperative to prepare ourselves to meet Him in judgment. The confession of the Name is paralleled with repentance in 2 Chron. 6:24. There we read that if Israel sin and repent "and confess thy name" they will be forgiven. But instead of "confess thy name" we expect "confess their sins: the point being that to confess the name is effectively to confess sins. The name is the characteristics of Yahweh. The more we meditate upon them, the more we will naturally be lead to a confession of our sins, the deeper we will sense the gap between those principles and our own character. Likewise in 2 Chron. 12:6 the statement that "the Lord is righteous" is effectively a confession of sin. And thus we are not to bear or take the Name of Yahweh called upon us at baptism in vain- the reality of the implications of the name are not to be lost upon us.

To steal is to take the Name of Yahweh called upon us in vain (Prov. 30:9), and therefore we ask to be given *only* our daily bread and no more (NIV); not so much that if we are found out, the Name will be brought into disrepute, but rather that we personally will have blasphemed the imperative of Yahweh which is heavy upon us [and note how these words of Agur are applied to us in Mt. 6:11. Likewise because "God is true", therefore it ought to be axiomatic that our words are true, as those bearing His Name (so Paul argues in 2 Cor. 1:18; 11:10). The woman of Tekoah wanted David to show mercy, and so she says: "Let the king remember Yahweh thy God, that thou wouldest not suffer the revengers of blood to destroy any more" (2 Sam. 14:11). To be aware of who Yahweh is, of the characteristics outlined in Ex. 34:5-7 that comprise His Name...this must surely affect *our* behaviour, seeing we bear that Name. It is an understanding of the Name that inspires our faith in forgiveness. "Though our iniquities testify against us, do thou it for thy name's sake: for our backslidings are many" (Jer. 14:7,9,21). The Name is called upon us in baptism (Jer. 14:9 = Eph. 3:15), and this is why we urge men to be baptized into the Name to wash away their sins.

Manasseh's repentance and forgiveness was associated with his knowing Yahweh. He prayed to Yahweh, but only on experiencing forgiveness did he come to know Him (2 Chron. 33:13). To really know the Name elicits forgiveness, and the experience of that forgiveness leads to knowing the Name yet further. Job went through the same; when he truly saw / perceived God, he repented and 'loathed his words' (Job 42:6 RVmg.).

The Name of God of itself elicits repentance. Faced with the wonder of who He is, we can't be passive to it. We realize and are convicted of our sin sheerly by the reality of who He is, was and shall be. Heb. 13:15 speaks of the fruit of our lips, giving confession to His Name. The "fruit of lips" in Hos. 14:2 RVmg. to which the writer alludes is clearly enough, in the context, the confession of sin. And the context in Heb. 13:12 is that Christ's blood was shed to sanctify us. That declaration of the Name elicits a confession of sin, albeit in words of praise, to His Name. Mic. 6:9 has the same theme. When the Lord's voice calls to the city demanding repentance, "the man of wisdom shall see [perceive] thy name"- i.e. repent. We come to know God's Name in practice through the cycles of sin-repentance-forgiveness by

God which we all pass through. It is through this process that we come to know the very essence of God's Name. Thus Is. 43:25 LXX: "I am "I AM", who erases your iniquities". We come to know His Name, that it really *is* ("I am") all about forgiveness and salvation of sinners.

Forgetting the Name of Yahweh was associated in David's inspired thinking with a wrong attitude in "the secrets of the heart" (Ps. 44:20,21). By contrast, remembering / being aware of the Name affects our innermost being, the secrets of our heart, the hidden self which others don't see.

No Idolatry

Manasseh is criticized for placing an idol in the very place where God's Name of Yahweh was meant to dwell (2 Chron. 33:7). He replaced the invisible things- the more abstract things of the characteristics of God which the Name speaks of- by something material and visible. We make the same mistake when we turn away from true spirituality and become lost in physical works. If Judah had not forgotten the Name [and this must refer to their lack of appreciation of it rather than forgetting the letters JHVH], then they wouldn't have served Baal and other gods (Jer. 23:27).

The Manifestation Of God

God's Name was called upon us at baptism into the Name. This bearing of His Name means that the principles of that Name bear rule over us in our lives: " We are thine: thou never barest rule over them; thy name was not called upon them" (Is. 63:19 AV mg.). The Name *is* called upon us; and therefore and thereby we are Yahweh's servants, dominated by His principles and character. Because the Name was called upon the temple, therefore it was simply impossible that those who realized this could worship idols in it (2 Kings 21:4,7); whatever has God's Name called upon it, whatever bears His image, must be devoted to Him alone. The Lord pointed out that this applies to our very bodies, which being in God's image should be given over to Him.

Quite simply, who God is should inspire us to be like Him; to copy His characteristics [the things of His Name] in our personalities. We must be " perfect" as our Father is; " be ye holy" , because He is holy (1 Pet. 1:14-16); " kind one to another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God forgave...be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children" (Eph. 4:32; 5:1); " merciful, as your Father also is merciful" (Lk. 6:36). Prov. 19:11RV uses language frequently applied to Yahweh Himself and applies it to the wise man: " The discretion of a man maketh him slow to anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression" . And thus Phinehas was commended for being " jealous with my jealousy" (Num. 25:11 RV)- his emotion at that time was a mirror of that of God Himself.

God's Name of Yahweh is essentially "*I am*". If only *He* is God, it follows that we should never 'play God' but rather seek to manifest Him. We may recoil at the suggestion we ever seek to 'play God'; but every time we judge another, every time we assume we know ultimately best, that we alone see the end from the beginning, that we have to make high level decisions which affect the destinies of others, or when we conclude that a person is not really able to have a part in God's plan, we are doing just that- playing God. I wonder whether or not Elihu fell into this trap in how he treated Job, power-broking as it were between a man and his God. He describes himself as "he that is perfect in knowledge", the very title for God

Almighty (Job 36:4; 37:16). Grasping the real significance of the Name means we will seek to manifest that Name of Yaweh but not 'play God', even though the two things can appear dangerously similar. 'God manifestation' doesn't mean playing God. Joseph held himself back from being vindictive against his brothers by saying that he could not do so, because if he did, he would be acting 'in God's place' (Gen. 50:19). His fear of 'playing God' meant that he wouldn't presume to judge them. All too easily, a too simplistic view of 'God manifestation' can lead us to assume that we are to judge and condemn others, thus arrogating to ourselves what is only and rightly God's personal prerogative. This problem perhaps is reflected in the way that I observe that those I know who speak the most of 'God manifestation' [and misunderstand it] tend to also be the most condemnatory and judgmental Christians I have ever met. It's not that 'God manifestation' isn't Biblical. It's rather that we can't interpret it to mean that we can go all the way and 'play God'.

Whatever carried the name of a person was seen as his property. If a city was conquered, it bore the name of the conqueror (2 Sam. 12:28); the names of owners were on their property (Ps. 49:12); and in this context, God's Name is over His people (Dt. 28:10). So to bear God's Name is to recognize His complete ownership and even conquest of us. And yet there's a significant twist to all this in Is. 43:1: "I have called you by *your* name, because you are mine". It seems like a slip- we expect God to say that He has called us by *His* Name, because we are His. But no- He wishes us to bear both His Name and our own name, He doesn't wish to subsume us beneath His ownership and manifestation to the point that we are not significant as persons.

Motivation to Witness

We in our turn are to manifest God's Name by outgoing witness; so many of the Psalms were written in order to do just that. Moses 'proclaimed the name of Yahweh' (Dt. 32:3 RV)- just as the Angel had proclaimed the Name to Moses in Ex. 34. In perceiving God's Name we are seeing something which cannot be kept to ourselves; God's personality of itself bids us proclaim it. And Moses goes on in the same verse to urge Israel to do as he was doing: "Ascribe ye greatness unto our God".

Unity

There are several connections between there being one Name of God- one set of principles with which He identifies Himself- and unity between believers. David had his people exalt God's Name "together", in unity (Ps. 34:3). The fact that there will be one Lord and His Name one in the future will inspire unity amongst the whole world. By being kept "in the name", we are made one (Jn. 17:11)- by sharing in and developing that unique set of characteristics that comprise God's Name / personality, unity between us is enabled by the love, forgiveness, justice etc. which we will show. The fact we carry God's Name means that in some sense God will act upon us and for us over and above our own freewill effort and personal worthiness. We are forgiven our sins and kept by God in the paths of righteousness for His Name's sake, for the sake of the fact we bear His Name (Ps. 23:3; 25:11; 79:9). Thus the Name and our being in it, having God's characteristics called upon us in imputed righteousness, is all of grace. And we should show that grace to others in the Name, treat them by grace as God treats us by grace, for the sake of their being in the Name. The connection between grace and the Name is brought out in Jer. 14:7, where Jeremiah recognizes that "though our iniquities testify against us, do thou it for thy name's sake". Even though so classically undeserving, Israel were saved "for His Name's sake" (Ps. 106:8; Ez.

20:9; 36:22 etc.)- and the same applies to the New Israel, baptized into the same saving Name of grace. They were not punished according to their sins for the Name's sake which they carried, and so will it be with us (Is. 48:9)- but we have to treat others baptized into the same covering Name in this same way as we are treated!

Faith In Prayer

The Name of Yahweh / characteristics of God inspire faith in Him. The more we know of Him, the more we believe. There is a magnetism in knowing His character, just as there was and is in knowing the person of His Son. The Hebrew word 'Amen' is derived from the Hebrew *emeth* meaning truth, trustworthiness, faithfulness. By saying this at the end of a prayer we show our faith in the essence of the Name. Perceiving the implications of the Name therefore deepens our faith in prayer. The Name speaks of the Father's desire to respond to His children. The root word *ehyeh* from which 'Yahweh' is derived occurs 50 times, mainly in the context of God's help and comfort in real situations. This is the practical nature of the things expressed in the Name. The repeated references to God's Name in Ex. 3 and 6 had a very practical context. Israel needed to summon all their faith to believe that actually, they were not in a hopeless situation there in the concentration camps of Egypt. Even when they were given no straw and told to make the same number of bricks, the comfort they are given is to remember the *Name* of their God, who had acted according to that Name in the past, and would do so in the future for them- because He is and will be who He has been.

The Name And Unanswered Prayer

At the time of the burning bush, the people knew Yahweh's Name as a word- because "By my name Yahweh was I not known?" (Ex. 6:3), and clearly enough the patriarchs had been aware of the Yahweh Name. But their point was that they didn't see from His Name, just as a word, what He was really like, and what He could do for them. The Egyptians and others with whom Israel had had contact invoked their gods by pronouncing their name, and expected a miracle to happen. Presumably Israel had tried doing this with the word 'Yahweh'- and nothing happened. Moses put the problem to God in Ex. 6, and the response was "*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*". "I am that I am" isn't a purely correct translation, because the Hebrew verb used doesn't mean simply existence in an abstract sense. It refers rather to being there / present / being someone or something for someone. Martin Buber, in my judgment one of the finest of the many fine Jewish minds to have engaged with this matter of the Name, concluded: "I am that I am" could only be understood as an avoiding of the question, as a statement which withholds any information" (4). I would put it somewhat more gently, in saying that God was saying that He will be present with us, will be what Israel ultimately needs, without defining precisely in what sense. Because we're mere humans, we don't know what to ask of God as we should; and His very Name is the comfort that He will be for us as we need, with our eternal salvation in mind. God seemed to have encouraged Israel to understand this by going on to promise simply that "I shall be [*ehyeh*] present" (Ex. 3:12; 4:12). He wanted them to trust that He knew best how to bring them to salvation; He didn't want them to invoke His Name in the primitive way the Egyptians did with their gods, hoping for a quick-fix miracle. God is only *ehyeh* for His people; and there came a terrible moment when He had to tell them through the prophets that "You are not my people and I am not *ehyeh* for you" (Hos. 1:9). Israel lost this 'presence' of their God. And we know that we are His people by the constant sense we have of the hand of Providence in our lives, even through the unanswered prayers that reveal an altogether higher and ultimately Divine game

plan in place in our lives. But like Israel before Moses, we wish for the quick fix, the waving of the wand to resolve the issues, the sense of the saving presence of God in our experiences, working out His ultimate plan of delivering us from Egypt / this world and from ourselves.

Endless Inspiration To Seek Relationship With The Father

Ps. 9:10 parallels knowing the Name of Yahweh with seeking God. To know God's Name is to seek Him. The more we enter into the depths of the Name, the more we will seek the Father; and in this sense, the Name is an endless inspiration to know the Father better and better, closer and closer, world without end. The whole declaration of God's Name to Moses is actually part of a mutuality between God and Moses. Moses has just commented: "Who am I to bring Israel out?" (Ex. 3:11). And God alludes to this in His answer, for His declaration of His Name hinges around the idea of "Who am I? I am...". The implication of the Name seems to be "I will be who I am / I am who I will be" - i.e. 'I will be God for you' (5). Surely the idea of the Name being declared in this way was to assure a doubting, depressed Moses that God will be God, will be true to Himself, and therefore will be God for us in all aspects, all places, situations. This is what the Name is really all about- assurance. For that was the context in which God declared it to Moses, as part of a relationship with that man. It's been observed that whenever God speaks about His Name, it is in the context of His emphasizing His huge commitment to Israel as His people, often in the face of their weakness (Ex. 12:12; 15:26; 20:2; Ez. 20:5,6) (6). The very meaning of God's Name is of itself encouraging- although it is somewhat masked in English translations. God 'is' not just in the sense that He exists, but in that He 'is' there with and for us. Von Rad puts this in more theological language when commenting upon Ex. 3:14: "It is to be understood in the sense of 'being present', 'being there' and therefore precisely not in the sense of absolute, but of relative and efficacious, being- I will be there (for you)" (7). The verb behind 'YHWH' was "originally causative", i.e. God not only 'is' but He causes things to happen (8). We aren't to understand Him as passive, just a stone cold Name... but rather passionately active and causative in our sometimes apparently static and repetitive lives.

According to Jn. 17:3 and its various Old Testament foundations, to know God is to live for ever. Eternal life is all about knowing His Name. Hos. 6:2,3 LXX puts it like this: "We shall rise [from the dead] and live in His presence, and have knowledge; we shall press forward to know the Lord". If we start knowing God now, and press ever forward to know His Name yet more... we have started the essence of the life which we will eternally live. And of course 'knowing the Lord' involves a personal union with Christ, experience and relationship with Him, of which intellectual knowledge is only a part. For in John's Gospel, seeing, knowing and believing are related; "he that has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:7-9) is paralleled with "If you believe in God, believe in me" (Jn. 14:1). We start the process of knowing the Father's Name in this life; and in this sense we embark upon what will be for us [by His grace] the experience of the eternal life.

Notes

(1) For more on this see A.D. Norris, *What is His Name?* (London: Aletheia Books, 1985). The only insistence I would have is that the word 'Jehovah' isn't the real name of God. "Jehovah is a hybrid form of the divine name which was produced by combining the four

consonants YHWH with the vowels of the noun *adonai*, meaning Lord"- R.E. Clements, *Exodus* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1972) p. 24.

(2) Another NT allusion to the name may be found in 1 Jn. 3:16,19,24, where we read of us having known [aorist past tense], presently knowing, and knowing in the future- knowing the Father, whose Name spans past, present and future.

(3) R.T. Lovelock, *Salvation In Jesus* (Notes Of The Central London Bible Class, 1954) p. 39.

(4) Martin Buber, *Moses* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958) p. 43; also see his *On The Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982) p. 59.

(5) See Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991) p. 63.

(6) A major study and lengthy exemplification of this is to be found in Walther Zimmerli, *I Am Yahweh* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) pp. 1-28.

(7) Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (London: S.C.M., 1962), Vol. 1 p. 180.

(8) James Muilenburg, *The Way Of Israel* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962) p. 44.

2-8-1 The Bible is the inspired, infallible word of God.

Sinai burnt with a fire which came "from the heart of Heaven" (Dt. 4:11 RV). But the people saw nothing; all they heard was a voice. The word of God was thus visually associated with a fire coming from Heaven's heart- from the very core of God Himself. The focus was upon the voice of God's words- hence "you saw no form; only a voice" (Dt. 4:12 Heb.). They 'saw' the voice in that they saw it associated with the fire that came from the heart of Heaven. This is the intensity of God speaking with us in His word. And Israel turned away from this intensity- for they asked that this experience not happen again, and that Moses instead be a mediator of God's word to them. The extent of inspiration is also revealed by the way that God says He spoke with Moses "mouth to mouth"- not 'mouth to ear', as if Moses just sat and listened; but mouth to mouth in the sense that God placed His words inside the mouth of Moses (Num. 12:8). Thus what Moses spoke forth wasn't merely the memory of what his ears had heard from God's mouth; rather it was God's own words put somehow within him.

The inspired writer of Psalm 45 says that his tongue is like the pen of a writer (Ps. 45:1). The writer is God. God was using the inspired person's words as His pen, with which to communicate to men. Ezra likewise saw himself as a "scribe of the law of the God of heaven" (Ezra 7:21). The God who is in Heaven wrote through a scribe here on earth. That's the amazing idea of Biblical inspiration. There's a wonder in inspiration which we shouldn't overlook. Those letters written on papyrus to the Romans by a wizened, nearly blind Jewish tentmaker in [perhaps] some cheap backstreet hotel in Corinth, those letters were the very words of God being written down by Paul, with one-time whores and busted gamblers looking over his shoulder, fascinated by Paul's message of guilt and grace...

Faith

Faith comes by hearing God's word (Rom. 10:17), "the hearing of faith" (Gal. 3:2,5). There is something unique in God's word which of itself inspires faith in the hearer. I have been involved in the conversion and baptism of a few thousand people in the former USSR and China who came out of atheism to faith. In the majority of cases, they were not persuaded by things like "Archaeology proves the Bible true" or the witness of fulfilled prophecy. Rather, the consideration of God's word and the message of forgiveness and salvation contained in it somehow persuaded them of itself that God is. God's word came as "an address to them, a second-person intrusion into their self-containment" (1). When we hear a voice, we are addressed, we acquire a partner, the existence of a person behind that voice becomes obvious and apparent. We hear of course many voices, from the Koran to the book of Mormon. But there is something in the Bible which has the subjective stamp of authenticity in the ears of many hearers.

(1) Robert Jenson, *Visible Words* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) p. 18.

Use The Word With Others

Therefore we will read, preach and study it with a zest no other piece of writing can command. The wonder of the fact that this book really is the words of God Himself needs repeated meditation. Out of Heaven, Israel heard the voice of God Himself (Dt. 4:36)- a God so infinitely far away, spoke to men. And those words have been recorded. When we read His word, we hear His voice. 1 Kings 13:21 speaks of us hearing "the *mouth* of God". Jeremiah spoke "from the mouth of the Lord" (2 Chron. 36:12). His word brings Him that near to us, if we will perceive it for what it is. Thus "Scripture" is put for "God" (Rom. 9:17; Gal. 3:8) and vice versa (Mt. 19:4,5). When we speak and preach God's word, we are relaying God's voice to men, and should make appropriate effort to deport ourselves as the ministers of His word and voice- not to mention diligently ensuring that our expression and exposition of His word is correct and not fanciful. We are to speak / preach "as it were oracles of God" (1 Pet. 4:11 Gk.). We are *His voice to men* in our preaching of His word. The word was and is God. Dt. 4:12 [Heb.] says that Israel heard God's voice and saw no similitude *save* a voice. To hear the word is to in that sense see God; for the word was and is God. There are other connections between seeing God and hearing His word in Ex. 20:21 and 1 Kings 19:12-14. Observe the parallelism in 2 Chron. 20:20: "Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper". Our attitude to God is our attitude to His word. Because the word is so pure, *therefore* we love it (Ps. 119:140). John Carter rightly observed: "Upon our understanding of what the Bible is, our attitude to it will be determined" [\(1\)](#).

A comparison of 2 Tim. 3:16 with 4:2,3 makes it clear that because the inspired word is profitable:

for doctrine *therefore*

preach the word; be instant in season, out of season (i.e. whether

you naturally feel in the preaching mood or not)

for reproof *therefore*

reprove

for correction *therefore*

rebuke

for instruction in righteousness *therefore*

exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine.

Hebrew poetry rhymes according to the ideas presented rather than the assonance of the words. However, this doesn't mean that in a couplet, the first part is directly equal to the second part. Subtle differences are set up in order to make a point. Am. 3:8 is an example of this. The lion has roared: who shall not fear? God has spoken: who can but speak forth [AV 'prophecy', but not only in the sense of predicting future events]? If a lion roars, so a man naturally fears as a result of it. God speaks, and just as naturally we can do nothing but speak it forth. Hence Am. 3:9 goes on to exhort the hearers to publish God's purpose to the Gentile nations around them. The lion roars, and man fears; and we are set up to expect: God speaks, and man should fear. But there is an intended dashing of this expectation. God has spoken, just as the lion may roar; but we are not to *fear* but rather to *speak it forth* to others. We come down, therefore, to something very basic, something in the foundation clause of many statements of faith: that the Bible is the inspired word of God. But if we believe that, if we hear that voice of Yahweh, we will inevitably, axiomatically, speak it forth to others.

Obedience

If the inspired word of God is made plain, then he who understands it will "run" in response to it (Hab. 2:2). A true understanding of the word of God for what it is will be related to realistic response to it. Insofar as we believe that the Bible is inspired, we will feel the passion and power of it the more, and thereby its impact upon us will be the greater. "Ye have seen that I have talked with you from heaven [therefore] ye shall not make with me gods of silver" (Ex. 20:22,23). Because of the wonder of having heard God's voice, therefore idolatry of any form will be meaningless for us. One can sense how much Paul felt the passion of God's word. It wasn't just black print on white paper to him. Thus he speaks of how "Esaia is very bold, and saith...Esaia also *crieth* concerning Israel..." (Rom. 9:27; 10:20). Paul had meditated deeply upon Isaiah's words, even to the point of considering the tone of voice in which he first spoke them. It was because the rulers of Israel "knew not...the *voices* of the prophets which are read every sabbath day" (Acts 13:27) that they crucified the Lord. He speaks of their "voices" rather than merely their words. They had heard the words, but not felt and perceived that these were the actual voices of men who being dead yet speak. They didn't *feel* the wonder of inspiration in their attitude to Bible study- even though they would have devoutly upheld the position that the Bible texts were inspired. And here we have a lesson for ourselves. The Lord brought this out in Jn. 5:39, in saying that "Ye search the Scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life...and ye will not come to *me*, that ye may have life" (RV). Their Bible study did not lead them to Him. And is just as possible that we too can be Bible-centred and not Christ-centred. For to academically study a document and perceive its connections and intellectual purity does not require the living, transforming, demanding relationship which knowing Jesus does.

James 1:18 speaks of "the word of truth", the inspired word of the basic Gospel message. But he goes on to appeal for us to be "doers of the word" (James 1:22,23). "The word" must be that of v. 18- the word of the Gospel. He sensed the tendency to accept the word of God as

true, to show this by baptism: and yet not to be "doers" of that word. It is in this sense that the word of the Gospel is what we grow by (1 Pet. 2:2 cp. 1:23,25; 2:8; 3:1); by our daily response to the most basic things which we have understood and claim to believe, we will grow spiritually. When we were baptized, we read the simple Biblical statements about baptism and obeyed them. That translation from Bible reading into practice is something which we thenceforward struggle to maintain for the rest of our lives. There is a power in the inspired word, whereby one mind- God's- can penetrate another with no intermediary but a piece of flattened wood pulp, black print on white paper. It's an amazing phenomena to be part of. Leo Tolstoy in his spiritual autobiography *A Confession* tells in gripping manner how he read the words of Jesus "Sell everything you have and give to the poor" and then finally overcame all the restraints of his nature to do just that. He freed his serfs, gave away the copyrights to his writings and began to dispose of his huge estate. Words on paper must likewise lead to action in us. The more familiar we become with the text of Scripture by daily reading, the stronger is the temptation to become blasé, and not read the word expecting to be taught something new, expecting to be challenged to change.

Speaking of the witness of Jesus to the words of God Himself, John comments: "He that hath received his witness hath set his seal to this, that God is true" (Jn. 3:33). By accepting words to be Divinely inspired, we set or affix our seal to them- we undertake to have them as binding upon us in daily life. Accepting the proposition that the Bible is inspired is therefore not a merely academic thing, assenting to a true proposition. It has to affect our lives. And note the humility of God here- that human beings can affix the seal of validation to the truth of God's word. This works out in the way in which lives of obedience to God's word are actually an affixed seal and testament to the truth of those words. Thus it becomes our lives which are the greatest proof of Biblical inspiration.

Personal Response To The Word: Feeling The Word Speaking To Us

Although we would all agree that the Bible is the inspired word of God, it is quite possible that we fail to *feel* this as we might when we read it. The people "verily held John to be a prophet" (Mk. 11:32 RV) but they rejoiced only for a short time in the light of his words. They rejected his most essential message- whilst still believing he was an inspired prophet. Or, thinking they believed he was. Moses trembled and Sinai shook and the people fled when they heard God's word. "God's voice was heard at Sinai: the same voice spoke in the Psalmist's words. But the appeal stands written in Scripture and therefore Paul can say that "Today" is a time with limits, but it was yet "today" when the Hebrews was written and Paul repeats the word of the Psalmist as God's voice to the Hebrews of his day. It is significant that Paul immediately adds that "the word of God is living and powerful". The words he quoted were no dead message but God's living voice... The exhortation "My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord" was God speaking "unto you", says Paul to the Hebrews. Is it less so to sons of any generation?" ⁽²⁾. Heb. 12:5 alludes to this idea of a living word by speaking of an Old Testament passage as 'reasoning' (R.V.) with us. The Lord Jesus spoke of how the spiritual man is to live by every word which proceeds (present tense) from the mouth of God (Mt. 4:4); as if He perceived God's words written in the book of Deuteronomy to be "proceeding" from God's very mouth in an ongoing sense. Moses speaks of how God says to each dying man "Return, you children of men" (Ps. 90:3)- as if Moses understood to speak the words of Gen. 3:19 to every man who dies. Likewise the Lord spoke as if the Jews of His day ought to be *hearing* Moses and the prophets speaking to them in urgent warning (Lk. 16:31); yet despite studying their words syllable by syllable, the Jews didn't in fact perceive it was a living word speaking to them directly and urgently.

Abel, through the account of him in Scripture, "is yet spoken of" (Heb. 11:4 AVmg.). Isaiah was prophesying directly to the hypocrites of the first century, according to the Lord in Mk. 7:6 RV. God says that He 'watches over my word to perform it' (Jer. 1:12 RV). Thus God didn't just write the Bible as we write words, and forget it. He remains actively aware of all His words and consciously fulfils them. This is another window into the way in which the word of God can be described as a living word. There is an active quality to the words we read on the India paper of our Bibles. The passage in the scrolls that said "I am the God of Abraham" was "spoken unto *you* by God", Jesus told first century Israel (Mt. 22:31). Note in passing how demanding He was- expecting them to figure from that statement and usage of the present tense that God considered Abraham effectively still alive, although he was dead, and would therefore resurrect him. Although God spoke to Moses alone in the mount, Moses stresses that actually God "spoke unto *you* in the mount out of the midst of the fire". The word of God to His scribes really is, to the same gripping, terrifying degree, His direct word to us (Dt. 4:36; 5:45; 10:4). This explains why David repeatedly refers to the miracle at the Red Sea as if this had affected him personally, to the extent that he could ecstatically rejoice because of it. When Dt. 11:4 speaks of how "the Lord hath destroyed [the Egyptians] unto this day", it sounds as if we are to understand each victory and achievement of God as somehow ongoing right down to our own day and our own lives and experience. Thus Ps. 114:5,6 RV describes the Red Sea as even now fleeing before God's people. And thus because of the records of God's past activities, we should be motivated in our decisions now. Josh. 24:13,14 reminds Israel of the record of their past history with God, and then on this basis exhorts them: "Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him..."

The living word of God which speaks to us each personally. In this sense, we are constantly being invited to place ourselves in the position of those who played a part in the historical incidents which that word records. The Jews quoted to the Lord Jesus: "He gave *them* bread from heaven to eat", to which the Lord replied [after the teaching style of the rabbis to which they were accustomed] by changing and challenging a word in the quotation they made: "It is not Moses who gave *you* the bread". He wanted them to see that the account of bread being given to Israel in the wilderness was not just dry history. *They*, right there and then, were as it were receiving that same bread from Heaven.

Personal Relationship With God

"Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth" (Hos. 6:5). This was and is the power behind the black print on white pages in our Bibles. Yet we can fail to perceive that God's word is His voice to us personally. Like David hearing Nathan's parable, we can get so caught up in the Bible story that we fail to perceive the message for us personally. Our familiarity with the Bible text is in some ways our greatest problem. Thomas Merton observed: "We manage to get so used to it that we make it comfortable for ourselves...Have we ceased to question the book and be questioned by it?...the understanding of the Bible is, and should be, a struggle: not merely to find meanings that can be looked up in books of reference [including, we might add, the writings of our own brethren], but to come to terms personally with the stark scandal and contradiction in the Bible itself...let us not be too sure we know the Bible just because we have learned not to be astonished at it, just because we have learned not to have problems with it" ⁽³⁾. Of course the Bible does not ultimately contradict itself; and yet the paradoxes presented there to challenge us can appear like this on a surface level.

Our Speech

The majority of words we hear lack power. We have got used to not paying deep attention to words. The Christian who hears a Sunday morning sermon every week for 40 years will have heard about 9 million words. 50,000 new books will appear this year alone. Those words, as my words, are coloured by the dysfunctions, background, experience, limited perception of the writer or speaker. And so we skim read, we listen with only half an ear to conversations. Rarely are we transfixed by a speaker or writer. And sadly we can tend to feed this attitude back into the words of God. We aren't used to reading inspired words. Words which have meaning and relevance and power. If we truly believe the Bible to be inspired, we will come to it in quite a different frame of mind to that which we normally have. But we need to click into this; a moment's silence and a prayer before we begin our daily reading are surely good disciplines. We should speak "as oracles of God"; not in that we are infallible, but in that our words should have real weight and intention. As God's word signals to the world that He is both real and credible, so should ours. We should be putting meaning into our words. And yet the confessions of one-time journalist Malcolm Muggeridge surely resonate with our own consciences: "It is painful to me now to reflect, the ease with which I got into the way of using this non-language; these drooling non-sentences conveying non-thoughts, propounding non-fears and offering non-hopes" ⁽⁴⁾. Our words are so easily empty and meaningless and pointless. All this is why we simply must read the word of God daily; for it is designed for "the reformation of manners" (2 Tim. 3:16 NEB), it is able to change habits and reconstruct our daily human personality.

We are born again by the word of truth. Having said this, James comments: "Ye know this...but let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (James 1:19 RV). If we are truly born by the word then we will be swift to hear it, as Jesus was of quick understanding in the word (Is. 11:3). We will share His aptitude for it, and we will be slow to speak anything else. The great danger is to be hearers and not doers of the word (James 1:22), but James implies that the antidote to this is to reflect upon the very nature of the word which gave us spiritual birth.

Humility

The Lord observed that the Jews had "made void the law [word] of God" by their *own* laws or words (Mt. 15:6 RVmg.). Here as so often, the word of God is set up against the word of man. The Jews weren't humble to God's word, and therefore exalted their own words to the extent that they actually voided the Mosaic law even before the Lord did so by His death; God's abrogation of His law was in fact a response to the fact that Israel had themselves voided that law, the backbone of the covenant they had with their God. Recognizing *God's* word as the ultimate word means that we are exercised in the humility of submitting our word and will beneath His.

Truthfulness

The fact that God's word is true means that we also ought to be truthful- for we should speak "as oracles of God". Moses surely intended a connection between his words recorded in Dt. 8:3 and Dt. 23:23- for they are the only times he uses a particular Hebrew word translated "proceed" or 'go out', within the same speech uttered the same day: "By every word that *proceedeth* out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live...that which *goeth forth* [s.w. "proceedeth"] out of *thy* lips / mouth thou shalt keep and perform". The influence of continually hearing *God's* word should be that *our* words are likewise truthful and trustworthy. The fact that the Bible as God's word is true has implications for our own

truthfulness. *Pistos* is listed as a fruit of the spirit in Gal. 5; but the idea it can carry is not so much of faith in the sense of belief, but of faithfulness, loyalty, reliability, utter dependability. If this is how God's words are to us, then this is how we and our words should be to others.

Materialism

The Bible has so much to say against this, the pervading evil of human societies down the ages. Ezekiel's audiences loved to come and hear God's words at his mouth- and in response to them, " with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after their gain" (Ez. 33:31 RV). Materialism stopped them from really accepting those words, even though they theoretically assented to their inspiration. Only in their condemnation would they know " that a prophet *hath* been among them" (:33). And so there is a chilling choice: to *really* accept the power of inspiration now; or have to learn it through the process of condemnation when judgment comes.

True Sensitivity

I suspect we all tend to read the Bible subconsciously searching for more evidence for our own pre-conceived ideas, be they doctrinal issues or practical. Yet if this book and these words are truly God's words, and we feel this, than we can actually be nothing other than truly sensitive and open hearted to whatever He is going to teach us through them. We will not seek, therefore, to induce our own conclusions from Scripture, but will rather come seeking to simply be taught, whatever the cost, whatever the surprise. Much of the knowledge which we have about life is merely the reflection of our own ideas. Imagine looking at the Mona Lisa painting in the Louvre art gallery in Paris, protected as it is behind glass casing. You look into her eyes, asking the usual questions as to what that look of hers is really saying, or whether it's just your own worldview which suggests to you what meaning there might be in her eyes. But then you see that your own eyes, and those of the other viewers, are being reflected back to you from the glass casing. To come to true knowledge is so hard. We need to clear our minds as far as we can before we begin our Bible reading, and pray earnestly that what we read there will be for us " *the truth* " ; that we will not read those words to just find our own preconceived ideas there. We are up against this problem continually, when we ask, e.g., a Catholic to read the Biblical record about Mary with a clean, child-like mind, with no expectations as to what we expect to find there. And actually it's still just as hard for us to read Scripture with that same pure mind, as the years pass by after our baptism. Israel 'heard' the word, and yet they did not "hearken" to it (Rom. 10:16,18)- we can hear but not hear. Yet if we *really* believed that Scripture is inspired, we wouldn't be like this. It is awesome to reflect how those Hebrew letters, those Greek ciphers written on parchment 1950 years ago, were actually the very words of God Almighty. But this is the real import of our understanding of inspiration. Israel literally 'heard' the words of Ezekiel, knowing that a prophet had been among them- but they weren't obedient. We too can pay such lip service to the doctrine of inspiration- and yet not be truly obedient to the word we know to be inspired.

Self Examination

James 1:24,25 parallel looking at ourselves, and looking into the perfect law of liberty. To read Scripture as God really intended, not as mere words on paper, is to find ourselves engaged in an inevitable self-examination. Reflect a while on two consecutive verses in Ez. 8:18; 9:1: "Though they [Israel] *cry in mine ears with a loud voice* [when they are under

judgment for their actions, which I now ask them to repent of], yet will I not hear them. He [God] *cried also in mine [Ezekiel's] ears with a loud voice*, saying..." Do you see the connection? As we read and hear God's word today, He is passionately crying in our ears with a loud voice. Just imagine someone literally doing this to you! If we refuse to hear it, then we will cry in *His* ears with a loud voice in the last and final day of condemnation. The intensity of *His* appeal to us now will be the intensity with which the rejected plead for Him to change His verdict upon them; and God, like them in this life, will refuse to hear. What arises from this is a simple fact: as we read and hear the pages of Scripture, as we turn the leaves in our Bibles, God is crying in our ears with a loud voice. Our response to Him is a foretaste of our acceptance or rejection at the day of judgment.

Joy

Because God's word of promise was so sure, David's heart exulted for joy in the certainty that he would inherit the Kingdom: "God has spoken in his holiness: I will exult, I will divide Shechem... Gilead is mine, and Manasseh is mine" (Ps. 60:6,7).

The Difficulty Of Reading God's Word In The 21st Century

Knowing that the Bible is God's inspired word means that of course we will read it in a way that we do not read any other literature. This may seem obvious, but we need to consciously reflect upon the reality of inspiration before we settle down to any protracted Bible reading or study. Here we have the very word of God. "Recent research has indicated that the average individual listens for only seventeen seconds before interrupting and interjecting his own ideas" ⁽⁵⁾. This happens, of course, when we read the Bible, and hear God's voice. 'Our' voice is there in conflict with God's; but the reality of inspiration should mean that we bring ourselves back to *His* voice, the words of God rather than those of men or ourselves. We live in an age where we are bombarded with words and voices as perhaps no other generation has ever been; the nature of digital communication focuses almost entirely upon words rather than any other form of communication. The struggle between the word of God and the words of men has perhaps never been more acute. In a rare moment of spiritual honesty, Saul admitted that he had transgressed the words of Yahweh "because I feared the people and obeyed *their* words" (1 Sam. 15:24). Their words, and the unspoken 'word' of their silent opinion of Saul, struggled within Saul's mind against the words of God. And because he didn't have a deep seated respect for God's word as the ultimate authority, he therefore gave in to *their* words. We have this same struggle almost minute by minute in daily life. It's not only our familiarity with the Biblical text which will assist us towards victory, but our base, core conviction that God's words are of ultimate authority.

The unique nature of the Bible as the only inspired book requires that we read it in a way that we don't read any other literature; we open *that* book in a totally different way that we open any other book. And seeing that we are preparing to hear God's word, and not that of man, we need to somehow each time consciously clear our minds to allow us to accept God's message. Much research has been done about what goes on in our minds when we read or hear words. Yvonne Sherwood observed, and I think she has it absolutely right: "Commentary can become virtually synonymous with the text, and it is possible not only for texts but for commentaries (as surrogate texts) to be canonized" (6). As we read the inspired text, we are 'hearing' the voice of our own commentary upon it, our own preconceived ideas. This is why the more familiar we are with a Bible passage, the greater the chance we skim read it and don't pick up anything new; 'Ah yes, I know what this means, it means... XY and Z, and [e.g.]

Jacob here is the good guy and Esau is the bad guy and Isaac was just a bit old and passed it and Rachel was just the worried mum [or whatever]'. And so the actual text of God's word becomes lacking in any freshness, in any cutting edge, in any causing of disquiet to us- because we are so sure that we know the right interpretation of it. As Yvonne puts it, commentary becomes "virtually synonymous with the text"- within our little minds as they read the words of God Almighty. And this is why there's so much awful misunderstanding of the Bible held by people who religiously read their Bibles. It's not that they simply don't read the Bible, therefore they don't properly understand it. They read, like we do, through a gauze and haze of personal preconceptions. This is exactly why it's so hard to e.g. shift someone's position on matters like the trinity. They read what ought to be for them 'difficult passages' with the preconception that 'Ah yes but that can't mean THAT because... X Y and Z... my pastor told us THIS and I read THAT someplace on the internet...'. All this may sound somewhat academic and overly psychologically analytical. But the fact is, we all tend to censor the text of God's word in our reading of it, especially when it may demand something radical from us. Of course, we're used to doing this- we hear and read words all the time, especially in this computer age. But we need to realize the psychological process that's going on, and resolve that when we come to *God's* word, we will give each word its weight and seek to be as genuinely open minded as we can.

Consider the parallels between the Lord's demand of the young man, and Peter's comment (Lk. 18:22 cp. 28; Mk. 10:21 cp. 28):

<p>"Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor</p> <p>...and come, take up the cross</p> <p>and follow me"</p>	<p>"We have left all</p> <p>[no comment by Peter- he censored this bit out in his hearing of the Lord's words]</p> <p>...and have followed you"</p>
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Peter seems to have subconsciously bypassed the thing about taking up the cross. But he was sure that he was really following the Lord. He blinded himself to the inevitable link between following Christ and self-crucifixion; for the path of the man Jesus lead to Golgotha. We have this same tendency, in that we can break bread week after week, read the records of the crucifixion at least eight times / year, and yet not let ourselves grasp the most basic message: that we as followers of this man must likewise follow in our self-sacrifice to that same end. I've commented [elsewhere](#) upon what I called the "spiritual culture" in the records of the crucifixion, the lack of adjectives etc., which is to me a mark of Divine inspiration of the writers rather than mere uninspired men writing down their recollections and historical accounts. Actually you see this elsewhere in Scripture. Take the record of the offering of Isaac. We read of two men, father and son, a knife, wood for the offering. But there's not a word about their feelings, their faith, their fear etc. Why? It seems to me it's written this way in order to encourage and invite our interpretation, just as the account of the crucifixion is. We're not intended to just let the words glide over us- the very style of presentation invites our response, our effort to understand and imagine and enter into all this.

As well as censoring things out, we tend to focus upon certain significant points in a narrative, or statements from a character- and what lies between those points is relatively non-existent. As daily Bible readers, my wife and I often spring each other with the question:

So what did you read today / yesterday? Allowing for the problem of mere memory loss, we remain with the sad impression that we remember various 'points' from those 4 or 5 chapters we daily read, and yet the material in between those points seems to be a blank. Appreciating what's going on as we hear and read enables us to better understand how we could read certain Bible passages for years and hold a wrong view of them; and then we have a paradigm shift, our eyes are opened to what God is *really* saying there. But likely we have to go through this process literally verse by verse of the whole Bible. It really is the work of a lifetime. Every word of God is "tried" (Prov. 30:5 RV)- as if each of them has been carefully prepared and thought out- hence the following exhortation: "Add not unto his words" (Prov. 30:6). Given the increasing growth of knowledge which we all have, due to the internet spreading it and making it so easily available, we end up finding it harder and harder to read or hear any words without them being merely a trigger for our own ideas and existing areas of understanding. Roland Barthes even went so far as to speak of "the death of the author" in the reading process (7), and Harold Bloom could write of reading as "an art of defensive warfare", defending and preserving our own pre-existing ideas (8). These statements are somewhat extreme, but they are hyperbole which makes a valid point. This is why so many people claim to offer objective, factual, honest-to-the-text interpretations of the Bible, which not only contradict each other but do *not* appear correct interpretations to others who read the Bible with just as much apparent attention as they do. Again, the debate about the trinity is a parade example. Let's accept that we *all* face this basic problem. We need to earnestly pray, however briefly, before and during our Bible study sessions, and try so far as we can to let God's word speak to us and not merely use it to support who we are and what we think. Summing up, we in the new creation are to become made in God's image, rather than seeking [as Maxim Gorky said, in a terrible phrase] to make God in our own image.

Notes

(1) John Carter, *in Dare We Believe?*

(2) John Carter, *Delight In God's Law*, pp. 232,233

(3) Thomas Merton, *Opening The Bible* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1986 ed.)

(4) Malcolm Muggeridge, *Chronicles Of Wasted Time* (London: Collins, 1972) p. 171.

(5) Cited in Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages* (Chicago: Northfield, 1995) p. 64.

(6) Yvonne Sherwood, *The Prostitute And The Prophet* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) p. 22.

(7) Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana, 1987) p. 145.

(8) Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah And Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1975) p. 126.

2-8-2 Bible Fundamentalism: Some Caveats

I feel that a caveat needs to be sounded about the *way* in which we believe the Bible to be the infallible word of God. This belief has led many groups into a form of blindly dogmatic Bible fundamentalism, which is not only astray from the spirit of our Lord but which also leads, paradoxically, to major failures to perceive the truth of God's word as He intended. Our

belief in the Bible should not be in such a form that the book becomes merely tokenistic for us, as if to merely append Bible quotes to our statements imparts some aura of holiness and effective infallibility to them. It makes a good exercise to look up some of the quotations that are inserted in brackets in some of our writing; not infrequently is it apparent that the verse quoted simply doesn't appear relevant to the proposition it is supposed to support.

A critic of 'fundamentalism' writes as follows: "The Bible in fundamentalism is comparable to the virgin Mary in Roman Catholicism: it is the human visible symbol involved in salvation: as she through the immaculate conception is free from the contagion of human imperfection, so it has a kind of perfection and sublimity that makes it sacreligious for us to analyze and criticize its seamless fabric"⁽¹⁾. I don't totally agree with this, nor with the overall thesis of the writer in the rest of his work. But there is a certain warning for us here- although I don't think our community has succumbed to the excesses of the KJV-only Bible bashers. Yet we need to ask ourselves how we use the concept of an inspired Bible. Do we use 'the inspired infallible Bible' to justify our tradition, certain that the faith of our fathers is true merely because we append bracketed quotations from the infallible Book to it? Rather we ought to be using this amazing Book to question, analyze and re-check our beliefs. Contrary to James Barr's approach, I do believe that the Bible is indeed "seamless". Yet I sense that because we accept the Bible as ultimately "seamless", i.e. it is without contradiction from God's viewpoint, we can tend therefore to eagerly seek to own the correct interpretation to every Bible verse, so that we can feel there are no contradictions in the Bible. For me, there are apparent contradictions, many gaps in my understanding, but these are my problem, and they don't impact my faith- they don't affect my belief and assertion that ultimately the Bible is not contradictory and is indeed "seamless". Yet I sense that for some of my brethren, there is an earnest, urgent need to have explanations for any apparent contradictions, of text or teaching, clearly explained away in carefully written notes in their Bible margins- lest their belief in a seamless, infallible Bible be made to look broken. I would argue that a belief that the Bible is indeed inspired by God Almighty rather demands that we accept that therefore and thereby, there will and must be contradictions *to our limited minds and understandings*, seeing we are reading Divine words and not human ones. Bible fundamentalism as it is often understood doesn't seem to allow for this.

There is a certain psychology associated with all religious experience, whether or not the experiences are valid or not. By this I mean that a Catholic may experience some of the same feelings when they take the eucharist as a true Christian does at the breaking of bread, or as a Hindu does when they participate in a ritual. We must ensure that our belief in the Bible as the inspired word of God isn't merely part of a spiritual experience which is just part of 'mere religion'; the Bible becomes our 'holy book' just as the Koran is for a Moslem, and elicits the same basic psychological reaction from us. For there is truth in the inspired Bible which far surpasses *any* other book; putting it bluntly, the Bible is the only God-inspired book around, and all other books which claim this are frauds. That said, here are some points to beware of:

- Many people today want to believe that somewhere there is some one book that is absolute truth; we too have those same basic instincts. People almost want to believe in Bible fundamentalism. May it not be that we see the Bible as merely the source of satisfaction for our credulous appetite, just as people in other times or cultures have fixed upon another such 'holy book'.

- The fact we can put Bible verses in brackets after the statements of our interpretations doesn't mean that our views are inspired as the Scriptures are. Belief in the inspired

Scriptures can lead us to think that our views are therefore inspired; this leads to an unhealthy lack of self-criticism and complacency.

- The fact the Bible is inspired is the foundation clause of many statements of faith. But an inspired Bible, nor our belief in this proposition, will not in itself save us. The redemption that is in the blood of the Lord Jesus will.

- Especially has our community, in some places, come to think that matters of latter day prophecy are in fact the Gospel, 'Because they're in the Bible, and the Bible is the word of God'. This is Bible fundamentalism at its worst. Yet many of these prophetic predictions, attractively presented as they are and often written about in racy journalese, are no more than science fiction fantasy. They are stabs at understanding, they contribute nothing to real spirituality; and the fact they are possible interpretations of the inspired word doesn't make them inspired of themselves, let alone part of the Gospel.

- We must beware of a mentality that goes something like this: 'I am quoting the word of God, which is inspired and infallible, therefore what I am saying is absolutely true on any Biblical subject, therefore you are seriously wrong if you disagree with my interpretation, in fact, if you don't agree with my view, then, you don't believe the Bible is inspired'. In other words, we must not allow our interpretation of the inspired word to become the same as the inspired word.

- We believe that the "original autographs" were inspired; holy men of old spoke or wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. The more we appreciate this, the more we will recognize that any translation of those original words is not in itself inspired. The originals alone were inspired. Yet the majesty and familiarity of the translations we read can easily lead us to think that every word we are reading in that translation is in fact inspired. Yet it is a translation of an inspired original source. It might also be worth bearing in mind that none of the original documents exist. We are, strictly speaking, believing that there *was* an original message that was inspired, which has come down to us through centuries of copying out and translation. I think we all accept that there have been cases of textual corruption- 1 Jn. 5:7 is the classic- and that many Hebrew words can be pointed [i.e. have the vowels inserted] to read in very different ways. And then there are the questions of which original manuscripts we should be translating from, etc. Because the Bible is the only inspired book there is, this can lead us to seeing the book as some kind of icon; it is the only 'thing' we have in our experience which is directly from God. Realizing, however, that the original autographs alone were inspired can help us see the Bible we read for what it is- the living, albeit translated and passed down, word of God Himself. God spoke "by the *mouth* of all his prophets" (Acts 3:18). It was their spoken words which were inspired; but there is no specific guarantee that the written form and transmission of them was likewise inspired. Their mouths, and not the pens of every scribe who wrote the words, were inspired by God- even though it would be fair to say that the preservation and transmission of their written words was the work of 'providence', and the Spirit of God in some way also at work.

- The view that every single word we read in our translations of the Bible is 'true' can lead us into the problems evident in many Bible fundamentalists. Take the words of Eliphaz against Job (Job 5:13). They were wrong words (Job 42:7). Yet they are quoted in 1 Cor. 3:19. Wrong statements can still be recorded under inspiration and even quoted. Take the mocking of Sennacherib. It's recorded under inspiration, blasphemous as it was.

- Because the Bible is inspired, we can come to define the Christian faith as an assent to a set of infallible Biblical interpretations- rather than a personal relationship with a real, living and ultimately true Being. The Lord's parable of the houses built on rock and sand makes the point that the very act of "hearing" God's word can give us the illusion that we are in fact acceptable with God by that very act alone. There is a psychological illusion that the fact we have "heard" God's word, or any word, means we have "done" it. And the Lord's parable addressed that head on. We would expect that "hearing" God's word is the foundation, and "doing" God's word is the building. But actually the Lord intentionally reverses our expected interpretation. "Doing" God's word is presented in the parable as the foundation. The word alone will not save us, neither will human works alone.

- There is a difference between inspiration and revelation which Bible fundamentalism doesn't recognize. God's revelation in the Bible is based around personal relationships and events. Yet it is possible to use the inspired Bible to reduce our faith and relationship with Him to a mere system of rationalistic argument. Faith and truth are in persons, the persons of the Father and His Son; whereas those who misuse the concept of an inspired Bible have reduced faith and truth to mere issues of doctrine and rational analysis. In the Bible, events, encounters, personal decisions etc. are the ways in which God deals with and defines His people, rather than by assent to propositions. This latter view can only lead to division, as a believer's orthodoxy and faithfulness can only be measured in terms of how they reply to certain questions. The community built on such a propositional view of truth will become fearful of any infringement of their positions on anything in any area of Biblical interpretation; the church no longer is a place where opposites and extremes can be tolerated; no longer can it be held together by faith and trust, but rather by a uniform interpretation of statements. Suspicion and instant defensiveness become the order of the day. The free exchange of ideas, spontaneity and freedom cannot be tolerated. 'Bible study' becomes a ritual repetition, either consciously or unconsciously, of the positions the local ecclesia has adopted; rather than an exciting, confronting and challenging experience of hearing God speaking to each one directly, and perhaps, therefore, to each one somewhat differently [cp. "All men cannot receive this..."].

- The fact the Bible is inspired mustn't be used to reduce the book to merely a set of true propositions; Bible fundamentalism tends this way. This can lead to our thinking that God reveals some information about Himself in His word; when in fact He is revealing *Himself as a person*, not just information. This tends to reduce God to a God who has acted but doesn't act now; to a God who has acted but doesn't now speak. An inspired Bible should mean to us that God Himself is communicating with us personally; and not just revealing to us facts which are right. Those who hold the 'propositional' view of Bible truth find it very distressing to find that the God revealed in the inspired Bible can change His mind, regret actions, and can be argued with. He is so active and personal. If we understand that God is revealing *Himself as a person* in the Bible rather than just giving us factual propositions of information about Himself, then these things are no longer disturbing for us.

- The end result of this kind of thinking is that we become totally objective in our view of truth; truth is not to be found in a person, only in cold statements. And yet the whole message of Christianity revolves around faith in and relationship with *a real, living person*.

- Because the Bible is the only inspired book there is, this can lead us to seeing the book as some kind of icon; it is the only 'thing' we have in our experience which is directly from God.

- David Levin made a profound observation: "Faith is not a relationship to the printed text, but to the God of whom the text speaks, and his son, the Lord Jesus" (2). There is a difference between words and what they describe. So often, we can confuse the map with the actual territory. Because we may read the map a bit differently, putting different meaning into the words of the Bible, doesn't necessarily mean that we believe in a different reality. It is the reality which we believe in which is important, rather than the words we use to describe it or Him or them.

Finally. God's word is His communication to us, and the aim of it is to bring about His glory, reveal and transfer His love to us. Bible study can become an absorption in itself, and the Rabbis rightly warned: "One should not make of the Torah a spade with which to dig, a tool for personal use or a crown to magnify oneself" (3). God's word isn't there to justify us, to give us ammunition in a war of self-aggrandizement. Too often it's misused in this way. Paul had something similar in mind when he urged Timothy to "handle aright" God's word, as a builder uses a tool wisely in order to build (2 Tim. 2:15). He clearly had in view the possibility that God's word could be wielded as a building tool in a destructive way, and not in order to build up. And so all too often the Bible has indeed been used, proof texts being appended to outrageous and abusive propositions, which when analyzed simply don't add up at all. And yet the excuse is then made that "the Bible tells us so" - when in fact behind this apparent Biblicism is nothing but fleshly thinking and desires.

Notes

(1) James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1977) p. 37.

(2) David Levin, *The Creation Text* (Livonia, MI: The Christadelphian Tidings, 2011) p. 21.

(3) Midrash Tehillim, ed. S. Buber (Vilnius, Lithuania: 1891) p. 240.

2.9 The Kingdom of God will come. We must live as if it is imminent. It will last for ever. By God's grace, we really will be there.

2-9-1 Strength Against Materialism

Therefore we won't be pre-occupied with building up a career or business for ourselves in this life; we will shun materialism and the associated effort which it demands. If we selfishly build up our own possessions through ignoring the needs of others, we have denied the Faith- even if we hold on to a clear understanding of the doctrines (1 Tim. 5:8). Loving money is erring from the Faith- again, even though we may keep our theoretical understanding (1 Tim. 6:10). It is perhaps intentional that three times in the same section in 1 Tim., Paul speaks of those who leave the Faith; once he speaks of this in the context of doctrinal error (1 Tim. 6:21); the other two references (5:8; 6:10) concern leaving the Faith through being materialistic, whilst holding on to true doctrines. The point is, the one is as bad as the other. The fact the Kingdom will be on *earth* not in Heaven is not just incidental. It means that we *now*, as we live on this planet which will be our eternal possession, will not strive for present possession of it, neither will be swayed by the pressure groups and political groups who only look at the state of the world as it *now* is. " The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again

[because he dies before he can repay his mortgage?]; but the righteous dealth graciously, and giveth. *For* such as be blessed of him shall inherit the earth" (Ps. 37:21,22 RV). Exactly because we will inherit this planet gives us strength against materialism; it means that we will be generous; we will not focus our lives upon temporarily buying a spot of land which in any case we will eternally inherit.

Everyone who has this hope will therefore purify himself in anticipation of its realization, and in appreciation of his current separation from the things of the present order (1 Jn. 3:3). By having this hope, we find strength against materialism and "draw nigh to God" (Heb. 7:19); and the Hebrew readership would have understood this as meaning 'drawing nigh in priestly service' (cp. Ex. 19:22). The Hope we have compels us to God's service. And that same Hope inspires us to repentance, too. For if He is soon to return, what manner of persons ought we to be? And so Mt. 10:7 and Mk. 6:12 parallel preaching the soon coming of the Kingdom with preaching repentance.

The Jews of the first century perceived the Kingdom of God as about to come: and, they thought, it would be a time of political freedom from Rome and material prosperity for them personally. The Lord Jesus plugged in to this perception, but He redefined their view of the Kingdom as a time of personal, physical benefit. He spoke of it as a time of peace, a time when God's principles would triumph, and in this sense He used a word for it which means more a reign than a realm; the triumph of God's principles over flesh can begin right now in a quiet way, in the hearts of those who will be in the future Kingdom.

The hope of the future Kingdom means that we will not now be materialistic. It will give us strength against materialism. And the model prayer was given by Jesus in the context of His comment on how some tend to always be asking God for material things. The Lord teaches that the paramount thing we should request is the coming of the Kingdom, and our forgiveness so that we might partake in it. *This* is the request we should be making- for "Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of...after *this* manner therefore pray ye..." (Mt. 6:9,10). Later in Mt. 6 the Lord repeats the same words: "Your heavenly Father *knoweth that ye have need of all these things...seek ye first his Kingdom*" (Mt. 6:32-34 RV). The structure of the Lord's prayer reflects this- for the first and only request in it is a seeking for the coming of His Kingdom. Having warned against materialism, the Lord bids His men to "rather seek ye the Kingdom of God...it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom" (Lk. 9:31,32) in the place of seeking for material things. The more we grasp that it really is God's will that we will be there, the more strength we will have to resist seeking for material things in this life. By being sure that we will be there, the Kingdom becomes our treasure, where our heart is, rather than any material treasure in this life (Lk. 9:34). The RV of Heb. 10:34,35 brings out well the same theme: "Ye took joyfully the spoiling of your *possessions*, knowing that ye have your own selves for a better *possession*" (RVmg). Who we ourselves will be turned into is our better possession, "a better possession and an abiding one" (RV). And this compensates for the loss of material *possessions* in this life. Therefore the writer urges them to not cast away their confidence in the receipt of this reward at the Lord's return (:35). The more humbly confident we are in receiving the Kingdom, the less the loss of possessions now will mean to us. Hebrews also associates the hope of the Kingdom with the characteristic of patience in the small things of this life. Hence Job, when he lost his hope, could exclaim: "What is mine end, that I should be patient?" (Job 6:11 RV).

2-9-2 Separation From The World

It has been pointed out that "Thy Kingdom come!" was violently in conflict with the Roman view that the lives of a subject people like Israel belonged to Caesar's kingdom. "Your kingdom come!" is therefore a word of defiance; to pray it is a subversive activity. This is also how the authorities understand the ministry of Jesus: it is subversive and not to be tolerated" [\(1\)](#). And so with us, the seeking of the future Kingdom is a radical denial of the spirit of our age, which seeks its Kingdom now; it demands a separation from the world around us. The well known description of the Kingdom in Is. 2:1-4 is in the context of appealing to Israel to change their ways. Because they would *then* walk in the ways of the Lord, therefore "O house of Israel [therefore] Come ye [now] and walk in the ways of the Lord" (2:5). The hope of Israel ought to motivate Israel to live the Kingdom life here and now. If we will eternally walk in God's ways then, we ought to now too. "We labour and strive *because* we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all men" (1 Tim. 4:10 RV).

Whilst the promise of immortal life is far from all that the Hope of the Kingdom is about, it is nonetheless wonderfully true that we are promised eternal, deathless life. The world in which we live has no such hope, nor even concept of a human being who now lives one day enjoying eternal life in a bodily form. Therefore they have come to value youth above all else. Sport and fitness have become national obsessions. Magazine covers present faces without wrinkles and gorgeous bodies. Old age is devalued; the elderly are disrespectfully ushered off into old folks homes, isolated from the general populace. Skin creams, cosmetic surgery, cures for baldness etc. are all the order of the day. Dieting and body building have become the equivalent of pagan rites. And thus the external rather than the internal features of personality have become emphasized. Compassion, self-sacrifice, humility etc. are all of little account. For the Christian, separation from the world of such superficiality is mandatory. Because there is no concept of judgment to come, no sense of the eternity we might miss, there is no moral constraint; enjoying ourselves in the here and now becomes the prevailing religion. And so it is tragic to see sisters worried sick about their weight increase, brethren spending hours each day on body building... caught up in the spirit of the age, in seeking to be conformed to the image of this passing world. The hope of life eternal in the Kingdom means that the attitude of this world to life should not be ours. May we die peaceful, slightly over-weight grandparents, joyfully anticipating the eternity to come!

Making Sense Of The World Now

There is a sense in all of us that the natural world around us somehow reflects something of the eternal, something of God; and yet we are not led by nature itself to the ultimate truth of God and the Gospel. This is why we have the Bible. Only an understanding of the Kingdom of God coming on earth can enable us to put all these hints and leads into some sort of framework and context, as from our position of separation from the world we observe it around us. C.S. Lewis observed: "All the beauty and joy we meet on earth represent only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited" [\(2\)](#). Yet that good news, that far country, is for us the Kingdom of God on earth. We perceive that the whole of creation is groaning, not for nothing, but towards the coming of the day of the Kingdom.

Jeremiah lived the Kingdom life now, separate from the world, when on the eve of Judah's destruction, he bought a field and carefully had it witnessed- because Jeremiah knew that "Like as I have brought all this great evil upon this people, so will I bring upon them all the good that I have promised them. And fields shall be bought in this land, whereof ye say, It is desolate, without man or beast; it is given into the hand of the Chaldeans. Men shall buy

fields for money, and subscribe the deeds, and seal them, and call witnesses, in the land of Benjamin” (Jer. 32:42-44). And so as he saw his world falling apart, he could make sense of things because he sought to live in his day how, one day, in the restored Kingdom, he knew he would live.

Watching For The Return

If we believe we really will be there, then we will look more earnestly for the day to come. We can never be truly enthusiastic about the Lord's return if we are unsure about our ultimate acceptance at His hand. Because we are *sure* that " When Christ...shall be manifested, then shall ye also with him be manifested in glory. Mortify *therefore* your members which are upon the earth; fornication..." etc. (Col. 3:4,5). We don't control ourselves because we think this will make us good enough to be accepted, but rather because we believe that we have already been accepted. By grace alone. That salvation is by grace enables us to look forward with eagerness rather than uncertainty to the second coming, and our lives are thereby changed. " The grace of God...teaches us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts...looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our saviour Jesus Christ" (Tit. 2:11-13). In other words- separation from the world.

Humility

And finally, the knowledge of the Kingdom should humble us. The wonderful good news of the coming Kingdom was explained to Belshazzar, but he had to be told that " thou...hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this" (Dan. 5:22). Knowing all this as we do...who are *we* to be there, to have a part in it, to even have been told about it...? It ought to humble us.

And it humbles us in another way too. We all to some extent struggle with God. There is so much we simply don't understand. But if we firmly believe in the ultimate coming of the Kingdom, we have a perspective upon all the cancers, the deaths, the broken relationships...all the collected groanings of our savage planet will surely be taken away in the coming of the Kingdom. Without this ultimate perspective, the apparent injustices of present life and even God's dealings with us would leave us lost, angry and with no real basis for an ongoing relationship with the Father.

Notes

(1) Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Harper Collins, 1998).

(2) C.S. Lewis, *The Weight Of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p.5.

2.10 The judgment seat will come. All the responsible will come before it. The rejected will gnash their teeth in anger against themselves.

Motivation To Preach

The prophets pronounced judgment to come on behalf of Yahweh, but then their prophecies often change pronouns for a few verses as they plead with Israel, and even Gentile nations (in the case of Isaiah and Jeremiah) to repent, so that these judgments will be averted. Their knowledge of judgment to come, their belief that the word they knew and preached would really be fulfilled, led them to a true sense of concern for those who would suffer from it, and they begged them to therefore repent. It gave them motivation to preach. Zephaniah pronounced judgment, and then diverted to personally appeal to his people (Zeph. 2:1-3). Or take Micah. Chapter 2 is full of a message of judgment against Israel. And then Micah pleads: " And I said, Hear, I *pray* you, O heads of Jacob...is it not for you to know [the coming of] judgment?" (3:1). Likewise: " For this will I wail and howl, I will go stripped and naked: I will make a wailing like jackals...at Beth-le-Aphrah have I rolled myself in the dust" (Mic. 1:8,10 RV). Rolling naked in the dust...this was the extent of Micah's passion for the repentance of his audience. He comes to the point where he would fain make sacrifice for Israel, even to the point of offering his firstborn son, so strongly did he take upon himself the sins of his people. But he tells Israel that even this will be no good; they must repent themselves: " Wherewith shall I come before the Lord...shall I come before him with burnt offerings....shall I give my firstborn for my transgression?...what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly...and to humble thyself [in repentance]" (6:6-8). In all this, Micah came close to the spirit of the Father and Son. For the Father would give His firstborn for their sin. Like the Father and Son, he came looking for fruit on the vine of Israel: " my soul desired the firstripe fruit" (Mic. 7:1). This chapter goes on to describe God warning Micah of how Israel would betray him and seek to kill him, despite his love for them, in language evidently prophetic of the Lord's sacrifice [\(1\)](#). Thus in Micah's love for Israel, in the depth of his appreciation of the reality of judgment to come which gave him such motivation to preach, he came to know the spirit of Christ crucified in the depth of his zeal to appeal to them. And we too know with quite some accuracy the judgment to come upon Israel and our fellow man. We cannot know this and knowingly tut tut to each other about it, and do sweet nothing about it.

If we know it, we will appeal to men with conviction, receiving similar motivation to preach, as Isaiah's heart cried out for Moab like a young heifer about to be slaughtered, feeling for them in what would come upon them, and desperately appealing for their repentance. Because the Moabites would cry out and their voice would be heard, " my heart shall cry out for Moab" (Is. 15:4,5,8). As the Lord Jesus is a representative Saviour, we too must feel the judgment that is to come upon others, and in that sense cry out for them as they will cry out. " Therefore shall Moab howl for Moab" (Is. 16:7)- but Isaiah, feeling for them so strongly, also howled for them; " my bowels shall sound like an harp for Moab" (16:11). This level of love inspired Jeremiah to adopt the same attitude (Jer. 48:20,31-34); he too howled for those whose howling in condemnation he prophesied (Jer. 48:31 s.w.). As Moab cried out like a three year old heifer (Jer. 48:34), so did Isaiah for them (Is. 15:5). All this was done by Isaiah and Jeremiah, knowing that Moab hated Israel (Is. 25:10) and were evidently worthy of God's condemnation. But all the same they loved them, in the spirit of Noah witnessing to the mocking world around him. Our knowledge of this world's future means that as we walk the streets and mix with men and women, our heart should cry out for them, no matter how they behave towards us, and there should be a deep seated desire for at least some of them to come to repentance and thereby avoid the judgments to come. Particularly is this true, surely, of the people and land of Israel. It ought to be impossible for us to walk its streets or meet its people without at least desiring to give them a tract or say at least something to try to help them see what lies ahead.

This isn't only an Old Testament idea. Paul described himself as the offscouring of all things- using the very language of condemned Israel (Lam. 3:45). He so wanted to see their salvation that he identified with them to this extent. By doing so he was reflecting in essence the way the Lord Jesus so identified Himself with us sinners, as our representative, "made sin" [whatever precisely this means] for the sake of saving us from that sin (2 Cor. 5:21). Quite simply, because of the reality of judgment to come, and the terrible condemnation of sin which there will be there, we receive motivation to preach and seek to "persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:10-12).

No Anger

Because God's judgment will come, we should not give way to our tendency to judge others. Psalm 37 is a Psalm about anger and resentment against others within the community of God who were persecuting the faithful. David was maligned and persecuted by his brethren more than most, and many of his Psalms reflect his inspired reflections. He says we should cease from anger and forsake wrath because the wicked will be cut off in the future judgment, and those who wait patiently for God's judgment will receive eternal justification (Ps. 37:9,10). We shouldn't "fret" because of others in the community, because there will be a future judgment and we will by grace inherit the earth (:1). This is the Psalm's repeated theme.

No Condemnation Of Others

And Paul's reasoning about not going to law against those whom we consider to be in the wrong is similar. It's based upon his reasoning that there will be a future judgment, and thieves, covetous persons, extortioners etc.- the very ones we might be tempted to take to law- will not inherit the Kingdom. If we take these types to law, Paul reasons, it's as if we don't know this basic first principle- that they will not be in the Kingdom (1 Cor. 6:1-10). And this is surely judgment enough. They don't need our judgment now. Rather should we receive motivation to preach to others from the thought of judgment to come.

Don't Worry How Others Judge Us

For Paul, the fact that he had only *one* judge meant that he could genuinely feel that it mattered very little to him how others judged him (1 Cor. 4:4-6). The idea of worrying only about God's judgment of us rather than man's lies behind Prov. 29:26: "Many seek the ruler's favourable judgment; but a man's judgment [i.e. the ultimate judgment, the only one worth having] comes from the Lord". But this takes quite some faith to believe- for in this age of constant communication between people about other people, we all tend to get worried by others' judgments and opinions of us. But ultimately there is only *one* judge- God, and not the guys at work, your kid sister, your older brother, the woman in apartment 35. The idea of the court of Heaven is a great comfort to us in the pain of being misjudged by men. It's a case of seeing what isn't visible to the human eye. As the human judge condemned Stephen- presumably by standing up to condemn him as usually happened in law courts (Acts 7:56 cp. Is. 3:13)- the Lord Jesus stands up in the court of Heaven as intercessor for Stephen. And this happens time and again in our lives, as and when and if we suffer the abuse of human condemnation and misjudgment.

No Materialism

The enemies of Israel are described as being judged with death, and having to lay down in their graves with their weapons, "ashamed of their might" (Ez. 32:30). It's like how the wealthy will hide in caves and throw their gold and silver to the animals before the awesome presence of Yahweh's glory, with moles and bats gawping at all the discarded wealth of the humans (Is. 2:20). Dynamically translating this into our terms, I think we can speak of men being ashamed of their bank balances, stock portfolios, expensive cars and furnishings, holiday homes... when finally (and all too late for many) the penny drops, that all this is shameful, all the pride, wealth and human armament / defenses of man are things to be terribly awkward about before God. But for us, the essence of judgment day is now, as we face up to God's glory in the face of our Lord Jesus.

Living Daily Life In The Knowledge Of Judgment To Come For Our Actions

Above all, how we act now is in fact living out the outcome of the judgment seat. We are masters of our own destinies, choosing to accept or reject God's gracious salvation. Our actions now are therefore our judgment; the only ones to be rejected in that day are those who have chosen to reject themselves. For the Lord came more to save than to condemn.

Action In This Life

The Final Judgment

Israel hid themselves from God's face [cp. Adam] by their sins, they turned to Him the back and not the face (Jer. 32:33; Is. 59:2)

They were then driven away from God's face, He hid His face from them (Jer. 33:5)

The elder son would not 'go in' to the feast (Lk. 15:28) (= the Kingdom)

The rejected are not allowed to 'go in' to the Kingdom (Mt. 5:20; 7:21; 18:3,9; 19:17,23,24; 25:21)

Some *depart from* the faith (1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12); Demas departed (2 Tim. 4:10)

" Depart from me...into everlasting fire" (Mt. 25:41); " He shall say, I know you not, *depart from me*" (Lk. 13:27)

The foolish virgins *go* (s.w. " depart") to buy oil (Mt. 25:9)

" Depart from me" (Mt. 25:41)

The nations gather themselves together against the Lord

He gathers them together for threshing (Mic. 4:11,12)

" They began to make excuse (saying)...I pray thee have me excused" (Lk. 14:18)- s.w. reject

They will be rejected at the final judgment, although they rejected themselves.

Burning in lust (1 Cor. 7:9; Rom. 1:27); riches (James 5:3) as the tongue as a fire (James 3:6) that now burns

The final burning up of the wicked (Mt. 13:40)

If we hate our brother we are in darkness. If we go out from the brethren, we declare we are not of them (1 Jn. 2:19).

Darkness = condemnation. We separate / *diakrino* / judge / condemn ourselves by our separation from our brethren (Jude 22).

We can bite and devour one another (Gal. 5:15)

As the Jews did in their day of condemnation in the Babylonian invasion (Is. 9:19,20 LXX; Jer. 13:14).

I must *go away* and bury my father...young man *went away* in sorrow...people *go away* to their farm, trading (Mt. 8:21; 19:22; 22:5; Jn. 6:66), Judas *went away* to hang himself (Mt. 27:5)

The rejected *go away* into everlasting punishment (Mt. 25:46)

The Jews gnashed their teeth against Stephen (Acts 7:54)

As they will at the judgment (Mt. 8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 24:51)

Notes

(1) See Harry Whittaker, *Bible Studies* (Wigan: Biblia, 1988) for full documentation of this. It's a fine piece of Biblical scholarship.

2.11 Christ will come and judge this world.

Separation From The World

Therefore we will be separate from this world. We will keep a light hold on what material possessions we do have. James simply says: "Ye have laid up your treasure in the last days" (James 5:3 RV)- period. As if to say: 'Laying up treasure in the last days is just so incongruous; think about it!'. 2 Thess. 2:1,2 implies that if we really have a firm faith in and focus on the second coming, we will not be led away by false teachers. The very fact that judgment day will surely come is therefore in itself a *command* to all men to repent (Acts 17:30,31)- and therefore it is a command to preach repentance.

The letter to Titus makes the same connection: "The letter to Titus was to help him in his ministry to those happy-go-lucky islanders of Crete, whose pleasant climate, sailor frequented quays and plentiful vineyards made it a place of easy morals, drunkenness, and idleness. This background accounts for the particular problems which created a duty for Titus to teach the church "that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world, stimulated by hope of the reappearance of the Lord and appreciation of the Lord's redemptive work, to purify a peculiar people zealous of good works" (2:12-14).

There was evidently a problem with immorality in the Thessalonica ecclesia (1 Thess. 4:3-6). And yet the ecclesia was so eager for the second coming that some were throwing in their jobs, so certain were they that it was imminent. Clearly the moral implications of the soon coming of the Lord had not been felt. And this is why in every chapter of those epistles, Paul pounds away about the Lord's return- a fact which they knew and enthused about, just as we can, and yet would not face up to its real implications. If Christ is coming soon, we must quit the things which plagued Thessalonica- immorality, laziness, irresponsibility etc.

Self-Examination

Knowledge of the coming of judgment leads to self-examination: " The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come... But who may abide the day of his coming?" (Mal. 3:2 cp. Rev. 6:17). Belief in the second coming must provoke the question: " What manner of persons ought (we) to be..." , as we hasten towards the day of judgment? " Wherefore, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent, that ye may be found of Him...without spot, and blameless" (2 Pet. 3:11,14). When Israel knew Yahweh was going to appear, they were to prepare themselves against that day by sacrifice and atonement (Lev. 9:4). Jonah simply proclaimed that judgment would come upon Nineveh; as far as we know, he didn't appeal for repentance. But the very knowledge of judgment to come was in itself an imperative, a command, to the Ninevites to repent (Jonah 3:4,5). " Let the bed be undefiled: *for* fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Heb. 13:4 RV). Sexual immorality is impossible if we truly believe rather than merely know...that judgment day is coming.

Don't Worry About How *Man* Judges You

1 Cor. 4:3-5 appeals to the reality of *God's* future judgment as a basis for not paying too much attention to how *man* judges us. If it is *God's* judgment that means everything to us, what men say or think about us, or what we perceive they do, will not weigh so heavily with us. The ultimate reality of our lives is the sense of God's future judgment, not the awareness of man's present judgment. If we really grasp the simple fact that God alone is judge, that there is only One who *can* judge us, that Christ will come, then we will say with Paul from our hearts: "He that is spiritual...himself is judged of no man" (1 Cor. 2:15). Of course, men *do* judge us; and it hurts. But we are to act and feel according to the fact that ultimately, they can *not* judge us. For there is only One judge, to whom we shall all soon give account.

Knowing the terror of the Lord at the judgment, knowing that Christ will come, Paul sought to use this to persuade men, including the believers at Corinth, to quit their sloppy attitude to God's Truth. Properly apprehending the reality of judgment to come makes us see the eye of the tiger, grasp the real issues of spiritual life, see the real essence of cross carrying Christianity. We will *believe* that whatever we sow, that we will reap (Gal. 6:7,8); and we will therefore live accordingly.

Our Words

In his low moments, Job gave up faith in a resurrection- and used this as an excuse to " not refrain my mouth" (Job 7:10,11). If we have no hope for the future, disbelieving that Christ will come, there is no control of our words (Job 13:13). And yet we live as men and women who know that by our words we will be justified or condemned, when our Lord returns.

No Secret Sins

Job dismissed as ridiculous the suggestion that he had committed adultery by throwing back the question: " For what portion of God is there from above? And what inheritance of the Almighty from on high? Is not destruction to the wicked?" (Job 31:2,3). For Job, the reality of judgment to come was so great that it automatically precluded any wrong behaviour done in secret.

2.12 We are to understand that Jesus is coming soon- quite apart from our interpretation of prophecy, we must live our lives as men who are awaiting the return of their Lord at any moment.

Loving Our Brethren

The Lord warned the Jews that they were not discerning the signs of their times as they ought to- i.e. they were not paying heed to the imminence of the day of the Lord which was to come in AD70, and neither were they perceiving that Israel's king was in fact amongst them. He went straight on to tell them a parable about the need to agree with our brother, because they were on their way to judgment. He links these two themes, of their not discerning the signs of the times and their disagreement with their brother, with the question: " And why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?" (Lk. 12:56-59). He seems to be saying that their discernment of the signs of the times was to be connected with their discernment of the need for love and forgiveness of their brother. The same basic link is found in Heb. 10:25, where we are exhorted to meet together and encourage one another " and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching" . The sense that the day is drawing near should find expression in the love and care we show towards our brethren. The Lord exhorts to agree with our adversary quickly, whilst we are on the way to judgment- and He says this in the context of warning us to be reconciled with our brother (Mt. 5:23,25). In the light of approaching judgment there is an urgency about our need for reconciliation both with our brother and thereby with God (is He the " adversary" in the parable?).

Israel should have been just and not abusive of their brethren, precisely because " my salvation is near to come" (Is. 56:1). We are to do righteousness, , because God's righteousness is about to be revealed (Is. 56:1 RV). We seek to live the Kingdom life now, seeing we will so soon, by grace, be living it anyway.

If we live with the awareness that the Lord could return at any moment, then we will live in a way which involves doing and thinking and saying things, of which we would not be ashamed were the Lord to return whilst we are doing them. Job reflected: "If I scorned the rights of my servant... what would I do if God appeared? If he questioned me, what could I answer?" (Job 31:13,14 Stephen Mitchell's translation). Living in the knowledge of the Lord's return at any moment will radically affect our way of being and living.

2.13 Through baptism, the promises to Abraham and David apply to us; we really do have the hope of salvation in the Kingdom; we are spiritual Israel, in covenant relationship with God, and therefore the people of God and separated from this world. Abraham becomes our spiritual father. The New Covenant means that the Old has been done away.

The promises to Abraham promised "blessing", and this is interpreted in the New Testament as the blessing of forgiveness of sins and salvation. The Divine title "El Shaddai", God

Almighty, is often associated with the blessings promised to Abraham and his seed (Gen. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3; 49:25). But a case can be made that "shaddai" is related to the Egyptian and other semitic verb *shadi*, to save, or as a noun, *shady*, Saviour (1). It has been observed that the Egyptians and other Semites connected their personal name to that of their god by this idea of *shad*- [name of god]-*shad*-[personal name], i.e., 'God so and so saves me' (2). El Shaddai, God the Saviour, is revealed as such through the promises of spiritual blessing, i.e. salvation, which were made to the fathers.

It has been well demonstrated that kings at the time of David sought to please their deities by building them a temple, a permanent house, at the time of their ascension. This was supposed to demonstrate how the house or dynasty of the new king would be made permanent by the deity (3). But Yahweh would have none of that; the faithful behaviour of David's son or seed was what would guarantee David's dynasty, not the building of a temple. God's response turned these understandings on their head- David was shown that he couldn't himself do anything to ensure the perpetuity of his family. He had to train them in God's ways; and allow God's grace to build *him* a house, rather than thinking that he could do something physical and concrete for God which would ensure God's grace. God wanted to make a covenant with David, by His grace, rather than demand gifts and obedience for the sake of obedience. Yet grace of itself means that we cannot be passive to it. The covenants with Abraham and Isaac are spoken of by David as a law, in the sense that they required certain things of those within those covenants (1 Chron. 16:15-19). And those same covenants are binding upon all baptized into Christ (Gal. 3:27-29), and the hope of the Kingdom which they bring likewise becomes a 'law' governing our behaviour. Ez. 20:37 speaks of "the bond of the covenant"- and "bond" is literally a fetter, a tie that binds, that restricts. To be in covenant relationship therefore means that we are not free to do as we like; there is an element of regulation in our lives, but of course it has a purpose- to bring us to God's Kingdom and keep us within the sphere of relationship with Him. But a covenant is a two way thing. This tie that binds applies to God too; hence the wonderful, oft-repeated idea of His *chesed*, His covenant faithfulness to us His people. He likewise carries a kind of responsibility to us. "This day you have avowed the Lord to be your God... and this day the Lord has avowed you to be His very own people, as He has promised you" (Dt. 26:17,18).

We could say that the promises to Abraham which form the basis of the covenant are therefore about grace. Dt. 9:5 spells out that Israel would not inherit the land sworn to their fathers because they were righteous- the implication was that it was a gift promised by pure grace.

Notes

- (1) Donald Redford, *The Biblical Story of Joseph* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970) p. 129.
- (2) Jaroslav Černý, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (London: Hutchinson's, 1952) p. 72.
- (3) Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001) pp. 337,338.

2-13 Covenant Relationship With God

It has been commented that the Lord's last words are prophesied in the Psalms: " Into thy hands I commit my spirit" , and that the Psalm goes on to say: " Thou hast redeemed me, Lord God of truth" (Ps. 31:5), suggesting that these were the very first thoughts of the Lord

on resurrection. If this is so, then there was a strong awareness in Him that Yahweh was the "God of truth". This is a title associated with the promises; in which case, His first awareness on resurrection would have been that the Father had faithfully fulfilled His promises to Abraham and David in raising Him. Such was the place which the promises had in the Lord's awareness. And in David's too; 'mercy / lovingkindness and truth' is a technical term for the promises, and it was these things that were ever "before mine eyes", and the way of life in which he walked (Ps. 26:3). The promises of God are so sure of fulfillment that we can see them, and should seek to feel them, as having been effectively fulfilled to us already in prospect. Heb. 10:36 speaks of 'receiving the promise'. We must fill in the ellipsis: 'receive the *fulfillment* of the promise'. God's promise is effectively its fulfillment.

The real import of the covenant-relationship with God which we have is brought out by David in 1 Chron. 16:15-18: "Be ye mindful always of his covenant; the word which he commanded to a thousand generations; Even of the covenant which he made with Abraham, and of his oath unto Isaac; And hath confirmed the same to Jacob for a law, and to Israel for an everlasting covenant, Saying, Unto thee will I give the land of Canaan, the lot of your inheritance". The covenant, the promise that God's people really will inherit the land, becomes a law, a "word which he commanded", something which should be thought about all the time. The sure promise of entering the Kingdom, the knowledge that by grace, according to the covenant, 'we will be there', cannot be accepted passively. The covenant-certainty of that great salvation becomes a command to action. We'll now look at some of those actions in practice. Reflect a moment upon the sheer power and import of the fact that the Father *promised* things to us, who are Abraham's seed by faith and baptism. The Law of Moses was a conditional promise, because there were two parties; but the promises to us are in some sense unconditional, as God is the only "one" party (Gal. 3:19,20). And as if God's own unconditional promise isn't enough, He confirmed those promises to us with the blood of His very own son. Bearing this in mind, it's not surprising that Ps. 111:5 states that God "will *ever* be mindful of His covenant". This means that He's thinking about the covenant made with us *all* the time! And yet how often in daily life do we reflect upon the fact that we really are in covenant relationship with God... how often do we recollect the part we share in the promises to Abraham, how frequently do we feel that we really are in a personal covenant with God Almighty?

David wrote another Psalm, Psalm 50, which is really a commentary upon the implications of covenant relationship. Those who have "made a covenant with me by sacrifice" (Ps. 50:3) are not to respond to this merely by a thoughtless offering of sacrifices; but rather, if they "take my covenant in thy mouth" they are to declare God's statutes and love instruction (Ps. 50:16,17). They are to live a life of praise that is based around a Godly lifestyle (Ps. 50:23). Thus if we are in covenant relationship, we will declare that to the world; and it will elicit a committed lifestyle from us. Being in covenant with God led David to "be instructed"; and he implies that those who truly know the covenant will "declare" it in witness to others (Ps. 50:16,17).

Separation From The World

We will not even consider courting or marrying the men or women of this world, nor voting for their politicians. We are a separate people. We have been redeemed from them by the precious blood of Christ. We are spiritual Jews. What God spoke to men like Jacob, He therefore spoke to us (Hos. 12:5; Gen. 28:15 cp. Heb. 12:5,6). We therefore will seek all our associations only within the people of God; the things of the people of God will dominate our

thinking, it will be our natural desire to meet with them and feel that the ecclesia (in whatever sense) is our preferred environment. Salt was a symbol of covenant relationship with God (Lev. 2:13); yet in the NT this salt stands for love, peace and kind speaking the one to the other (Mk. 9:50; Col. 4:6). This is the result of true membership in covenant relationship; a true and abiding love for all others in covenant. Abraham's example of *consciously* shunning the things of this world will be matched in us his children. The very fact we have received the promises should mean that therefore we separate ourselves "from the corruption that is in the world" (2 Pet. 1:4). We will be happy to have a light hold on possession of property, knowing that this earth is ours, it's just that for now, we are just passing through it, surveying it, after the pattern of Abraham. The Gentiles "know not God", and the idea of 'knowing God' is a reference to covenant relationship with Him rather than cold theological knowledge of propositional truth; and because of this, they live "in the passion of lust" (1 Thess. 4:5). By contrast, those who do "know God" in covenant relationship will not live the life of lust.

When we read that the faithful 'saw' the promises although they didn't receive them, we are surely meant to understand that they 'saw' the *fulfilment* of the promises (Heb. 11:13). 'The promises' are so sure of fulfilment that the phrase is put by metonymy for 'the fulfilment of the promises'. And because of their utter certainty, we are to be strangers and pilgrims, and unworldly (Heb. 11:13,14). There is therefore an obvious link between doctrine and practice. A doctrine believed leads to us coming out of this tangled world. Likewise 1 Jn. 5:5 teaches that we overcome the world by believing an idea- that Jesus is the Son of God [as promised to Abraham and David].

There really is such strong emphasis that Abraham didn't own the land whilst he lived in it. Gen. 23:4,7,12,13 seems to draw a difference in legal categories between "resident aliens", "natives" and "the local people". Abraham was an alien, and needed approval from the local community council to buy a burial place; and even then, the council had to speak with the owner and as it were do Abraham a favour. Further, the price of 400 shekels for some land with a cave in it to bury the dead was exorbitant (Gen. 23:14). There are records of the sale of whole villages in northern Syria dating from about this time, recorded in the Alalakh Tablets (1). They were sold for between 100 and 1000 shekels. Jeremiah paid 17 shekels for a field (Jer. 32:9); Omri paid 6000 shekels for the entire site of Samaria (1 Kings 16:24). If ever we feel ripped off by this world, unreasonably treated in this land which is eternally ours, powerless to protest, left without option as Abraham was- then we are following in his steps, and are truly his "seed".

Motivation To Commitment

God's covenant commitment to us is amazing. In Genesis 15, He made a one-sided commitment to Abraham. The idea of the dead animals in the ceremony was to teach that 'So may I be dismembered and die if I fail to keep my promise'. Jer. 34:18 speaks of how Israelites must die, because they passed between the pieces of the dead animal sacrifices in making a covenant. But here in Gen. 15, it is none less than the God who cannot die who is offering to do this, subjecting Himself to this potential curse! And He showed Himself for real in the death of His Son. That was His way of confirming the utter certainty of the promises to Abraham which are the basis of the new covenant which He has cut with us (Rom. 15:8; Gal. 3:17). Usually both parties passed between the dead animals- but only Yahweh does. It was a one-sided covenant from God to man, exemplifying His one-way grace. The Lord died, in the way that He did, to get through to us how true this all is- that God Almighty cut a sober, unilateral covenant with us personally, to give us the Kingdom.

We simply can't be passive to such grace, we have no option but to reach out with grace to others in care and concern- and we have a unique motivation in doing this, which this unbelieving world can never equal. From one viewpoint, the only way we can not be saved is to wilfully refuse to participate in this covenant. The Lord laboured the point that the "unforgivable sin" was to "blaspheme the Holy Spirit" (Mk. 3:28-30; Mt. 12:31-37; Lk. 12:10). But it's been demonstrated that this is a reference to Jewish writings and traditions such as Jubilees 15:33 "where not circumcising one's child is unforgivable, because it is a declaration that one does not belong to the covenant people" (2).

All those in true covenant relationship with God will realize the fullness of commitment to us which He has entered into, and will likewise make a whole-hearted response and sacrifice (Mal. 2:4,5). Ps. 103:18 parallels "such as keep his covenant" with "those that remember his commandments to do them". Covenant relationship brings a natural desire to live within the atmosphere of God's spirituality. For Israel in covenant with God, absolutely nothing- not sex, menstruation, the content of clothing fabric, diet- could fall outside the scope of their covenant relationship. And so in principle it is with us under the new covenant. Such a relationship also precludes the worship of *any* other God. Moses said that God had made a covenant with every member of Israel "lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away...to go and serve the gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall" (Dt. 29:14-18). The height of the demand, the extent of the implication of being in covenant with God ought to preclude the possibility of worshipping anything else. The covenant we have entered has constant and binding claims upon our loyalty. This is the implication of the promises to Abraham which form the basis of that covenant. It is worth observing that at times of Israel's apostasy, God reconfirmed Israel's covenant relationship with Him (Jer. 11:2). By reminding them of the nature of their covenant relationship, they were being led to realize that the life of sin was not for them. And so there should be a like awareness in us when at least weekly we are reminded of our covenant bond.

Living The Kingdom Life Now

After David received the promises about the future Messianic Kingdom, he went out and established his Kingdom, attacking Israel's enemies and driving them out of the land (1 Chron. 18:1-3). Our response to the future Hope of the Kingdom, which we too have through the very same promises, should be to try to live the Kingdom life now, as far as we can. "Mercy and truth" is a phrase often relevant to the promises; David rejoiced in God's "mercy and truth" when for a time he had to live "among lions...them that are set on fire, the sons of men, whose teeth are spears..." (Ps. 57:3,4,10). He believed that mercy and truth, the fulfillment of the promises, would be revealed against those who cursed him; because of his identity with Abraham's seed, he believed it would be true of him that whoever cursed him would be cursed. Ps. 57 was written as David hid in the cave from Saul; and he perceived God's sending forth of help in time of crisis as related to the sending forth of the "mercy and truth" of the promises to Abraham. In David's crisis- he thought of the promises!

Likewise our part in the promises should enable us to live Godly in this present evil world. Ps. 89:1-3 records David breaking forth into joy simply because of the promises made to him. Although Israel were in covenant relationship with God, there was no "truth nor mercy nor knowledge of God in the land", but rather the very opposite: swearing, lying etc. (Hos. 4:1,2). If they had truly believed the "mercy and truth" of the promises to Abraham and the covenant based around them, they would have been merciful and truthful. But they knew these promises but didn't believe them. Having expounded the deeper aspects of the promises

to Abraham in Romans 9-11, Paul spins the argument round to practical issues: " I beseech you *therefore*, brethren, by the mercies of God [a technical term for the promises- 'the sure mercies of David', Is. 55:3], that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1).

We must remember that baptism means that we are *now* the seed of Abraham, and the blessings of forgiveness, of all spiritual blessings in heavenly places, and God's turning us away from our sins are right now being fulfilled in us (Acts 3:27-29). Israel were multiplied as the sand on the sea shore (2 Sam. 17:11; 1 Kings 4:20), they possessed the gates of their enemies (Dt. 17:2; 18:6)- all in antitype of how Abraham's future seed would also receive the promised blessings in their mortal experience, as well as in the eternal blessedness of the future Kingdom.

Unity Amongst Us

Gal. 3:27-29 explains that through baptism into the Abrahamic covenant, there is a special unity between all in that covenant. Slave and free, male and female, Jew and Gentile are all thereby united, as they were in the early church. David Bosch comments: " The revolutionary nature of the early Christian mission manifested itself, *inter alia*, in the new relationships that came into being in the community. Jew and Roman, Greek and barbarian, free and slave, rich and poor, woman and man, accepted one another as brothers and sisters. It was a movement without analogy, indeed a sociological impossibility" ⁽³⁾. Likewise ecclesial life today can seem " a sociological impossibility" , but through the power of the most basic facts of the Gospel preached to Abraham, this incredible unity is possible. As a nexus " without analogy" , the true Christian community of itself ought to attract the attention of earnest men and women- just as the Lord predicted. Our unity should be the basis of our appeal to men. And yet our divided state is a tragic witness against us in this regard. Because there is neither Jew nor Gentile in Christ means that in practice, amongst those that " have put on the new man [a reference to baptism into Christ]...there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondman, freeman [clear allusion to Gal. 3:27-29]. But Christ is all, and in all. Put on *therefore*...a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another and forgiving one another" (Col. 3:10-13 RV). *These things* are what the promises to Abraham are all about in practice! Because we are all now united in Christ in our status as Abraham's seed, *therefore* we must see to it that through kindness, patience etc. there really *is not* Jew and Greek, or division of any kind, between us.

Our covenant relationship with God isn't just between Him and us. It demands that we are in covenant with His people; we can't love Him that begat without loving those others begotten by Him, as John puts it (1 Jn. 4:9). When John later heard the voice of Jesus and turned to see Him, instead of seeing Jesus in person as he expected, he saw instead the seven candlesticks, symbolic of the ecclesias / body of Christ (Rev. 1:12). Perhaps this was the idea behind the way that "Jehoiada made a covenant between the Lord and the king and the people, that they should be the Lord's people: between the king also and the people" (2 Kings 11:17). Lk. 14:32 records the parable of the man with a small army going to meet the General with a far larger army- and then wisely desiring "conditions (lit. 'things') of peace". The man is clearly us, and the General coming with His hosts is evidently the Lord Jesus; we are to come to peace with Him before the final meeting of God and man in judgment. But this Greek phrase 'things of peace' recurs in Rom. 14:19, where Paul speaks of making every effort to live at peace *with our brethren*, e.g. being sensitive to their scruples about food. Paul clearly understood that our peace with God cannot be unrelated to our peace with our brethren. To

make peace with God and His Son as required in Lk. 14:32 must have some practical issue- and practically, it means living at peace with the rest of God's children.

There's definitely a tendency to think that we can have a relationship with the Father and Son, and this is all that matters. John countered this tendency, by arguing that "If a man say [and apparently this *was* being said by some brethren], "I love God", and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who loves not his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen" (1 Jn. 4:20). Paul foresaw this same tendency in 2 Cor. 10:7: "If any man trust to himself that he is Christ's, let him *of himself* think this again, that, as he is Christ's, even so are we Christ's". "Of himself" suggests that our internal thinking, our self-perception, of ourselves as "in Christ" cannot be valid unless we perceive "Christ" as having our brethren "in Him" also. And Paul's own example showed what he meant; for in all his hardships he was comforted not just by the Father and Son directly, but by the faith of his brethren- even if that faith was weak (e.g. 1 Thess. 3:7).

Faithfulness To Each Other

Mal. 2:8,10,14 speaks of how a broken covenant with God is related to a broken covenant with ones brethren and ones partner. The nature of our covenant relationship with God is reflected in our relationships with each other. In giving Israel the reasons for their destruction, God parallels their breaking covenant with Him, with their injustice (Jer. 21:12; 22:3,9,13 RV). If we sense the grace of God shown to us in covenant relationship, we will respond by having justice and integrity in all our ways, awed as we will be by the certainty and reliability of His grace to us in its covenantal form.

Strength Against Materialism

Abraham was promised that his seed would have Yahweh as their personal God, and would eternally inherit the land. In a sense, the promises that the seed *would* inherit the land, and that God *would be* their God were fulfilled straight after God said them. He became Isaac's God (Gen. 31:42,53 refer to this), the God of Abraham's son. Time and again God reminds Israel that He *is* their God. And that land in a sense *was* given to the Jewish fathers (Gen. 15:18; Dt. 28:63; 30:5 NIV; Josh. 1:2-9; 21:43; 1 Kings 4:20,21). David could praise God simply because He was "my God" (Ps. 118:28)- an allusion back to the Abrahamic promise. Of course, the *main* fulfillment of this promise will be in the Kingdom; but in principle, the promise has *already* been fulfilled to Abraham's seed- i.e., us! *This earth on which we live is ours!* We are rulers of all we survey. All things *are* ours (1 Cor. 3:21). We are just strangers here, waiting for the call to rise up and take what *is now* ours. This is fundamental. We are brainwashed by capitalist materialism to think that we must work our hearts out to achieve *ownership* of things and land now; so we can put a fence round it and say it's ours, buy a security system or rent a guard to make sure it stays ours, buy insurance to make sure no 'act of God' will take it from us... all this is quite contrary to the most essential teaching of the promises to Abraham. Personal 'ownership' of property and possessions may well be something which is inescapable for us; but let's never forget that actually all things are ours, and we buy these things with the same feeling Abraham must have had when he had to buy *part of his own land* in which to bury his wife. It was *his* land, but he hadn't at that time received it. And so with us, with the whole world and all that is in it.

Reflect on what the Lord was really saying in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. It was Abraham who showed the rich man how useless were human riches. The rich man thought

that his natural ancestry was enough- he appeals to "father Abraham". But the point of the parable was surely that the rich man was not a true son of Abraham because he had been materialistic and had neglected the needs of his poorer brother. *This* was and is the implication of being a true son of Abraham.

The promises God makes involve a solemn commitment by Him to us- the serious, binding nature of His oath to us is easy to forget. God swore to David "by my holiness" (Ps. 89:35). The Hebrew for "holiness" is the very same word translated "dedication". David's response to God's dedication to him was to dedicate [s.w.] all the silver and gold which he had won from this world, to the service of God's house (1 Kings 7:51; 1 Chron. 26:26; 2 Chron. 5:1). Our response to God's dedication to us should be a like dedication of what we have to Him. Covenant relationship with God requires much of both Him and us. The case of David is a nice illustration of the meaning of grace. David wanted to *do* something for God- build Him a house, spending his wealth to do so. God replied that no, He wanted to build *David* a house. And He started to, in the promises He gave David. And David's response to that grace is to still *do* something- to dedicate his wealth to God's house, as God had dedicated Himself to David's house. This is just how grace and works should be related in our experience.

The letter to the Hebrew Christians describes salvation and the Kingdom with the idea of inheritance. The believers had possessions (Heb. 10:34), had been generous to others (Heb. 6:10), and yet needed the exhortation to "not live for money; be content with what you have" (Heb. 13:5) and to "share what you have with others" (Heb. 13:16). We could surmise that this audience weren't unlike many of us today- not overly wealthy, but sorely tempted to be obsessed by possessions and material advantage. And to them, as to us, the writer emphasizes that salvation in Christ is the ultimate inheritance or possession (Heb. 1:2,4,14, 6:12,17; 9:15; 11:7; 12:17); this is the ultimate "profit" (Heb. 13:17). Hence Esau was quoted as an example- he gave up his inheritance for the sake of a material meal (Heb. 12:15-17). The *eternal* inheritance which is promised to us in the Gospel, rooted as it is in the promises to the Jewish fathers, should make us not seek for great material inheritance in this present world.

Inspiration To Forgiveness

The promises to David are described as the mercy of God (Is. 55:3; Ps. 89:33,34). God having a son is the sign of His love for us, and this must elicit a response in us. David himself marvelled that such mercy had been shown to him: "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house...thou knowest thy servant" (2 Sam. 7:18-20). And yet in the very next chapters, we read of how David made a renewed attempt to show mercy to the house of Saul. Mephibosheth says that he is "thy servant...what is thy servant, that thou shouldest look upon such...as I am?" (2 Sam. 9:8). Mephibosheth is using the very words which David used to God; David is showing mercy to Mephibosheth in the very way in which the promises of God to him were the "mercies" shown to David. Appreciating that the promises concern us personally, and that they reveal such loving grace from the Father, can only lead to a similar response in showing love and grace through entering into the lives and destinies of others.

Personal Relationship With God

The most oft repeated feature of the promises to Abraham can for that very reason be easily overlooked. Notice how the personal pronouns are the key words: "I will establish *my* covenant...between *me* and *you* and *your* descendants...to be *your* God...I will be *their* God" (Gen. 17:6-8). God Almighty is committing Himself to Abraham and Abraham's seed in a

way so insistent and so awesome that only contemplation of it can elicit the true sense of wonder which we ought to have at being in covenant relationship with God Almighty. The fact that the basis of our relationship with God is an eternal covenant means that we do not drift in and out of fellowship with God according to our awareness of Him. We are His people. Every hour of every day. This is why Asaph can rejoice that despite his low moments of being “brutish...as a beast before thee, nevertheless I am continually with thee” (Ps. 73:22,23).

Repentance

When Israel enter the new covenant of forgiveness, then they will loathe themselves for their sins -and this is the effect which the assurance of forgiveness in the new covenant should have upon us. The new Spirit / attitude which the new covenant inspires is one of contrition.

“The sure mercies of David” result in the wicked man forsaking his way (Is. 55:3,7). The description of the promises to David as “sure mercies” (1 Chron. 17:13) may perhaps be with a reference to his sin with Bathsheba; his forgiveness in that incident is typical of that which we all receive (Rom. 4:6-8). The very existence of the “mercies of / to David” therefore inspire us in forsaking sinful thoughts and wicked ways (Is. 55:7).

Such is the wonder of God’s promise to us that we really have no excuse to sin. Every sin is in a sense a denial of His promises. God told David that he had no excuse for what he did with Uriah and Bathsheba, because he had given him so much, “and if that had been too little, I would have added unto thee...” (2 Sam. 12:8). “Too little” sends the mind back to 2 Sam. 7:19, where the promises to David are described as a “little thing”; the promises were so wonderful that David should not have allowed himself to fall into such sin. And us likewise.

Humility

David was humbled when he received the promises, just as we should be by realizing that we really are in covenant relationship with God. “Who am I...?” was his response (2 Sam. 7:18). Like Jacob, he felt himself unworthy of all the “mercy and truth” shown him in the promises (Gen. 32:10).

Joy

Abraham rejoiced to see the day of Christ (Jn. 8:56)- and this is surely an allusion to how he laughed [for joy] at the promise of Isaac. He “gladly received the promises” (Heb. 11:17 RV). And realizing that through baptism the promises are made to us ought to inspire a deep seated joy too. Eph. 1:11 speaks of how we “have obtained an inheritance” through being “in Christ”. This is just another way of expressing the great truth of Gal. 3:27-29- that through baptism into Christ, we receive the promise of the inheritance promised to Abraham. But Paul continues in Eph. 1:12: “That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in [Gk. ‘into’ - through baptism] Christ”. The fact we are in Christ by baptism and thus have the Abrahamic promises leads to praise of God’s grace. Yet we will only achieve this if we firmly grasp the real, pointed relevance of the promises to us; that we who are baptized are each one truly and absolutely in Christ, and the promises apply to *me* personally. An advantage of reading versions that use “ye” and “thou” is that one can discern at a glance when ‘you’ plural and ‘you’ singular is being used. Gal. 3:26-29 speaks in the plural: “*Ye* are all the children of God by faith in Christ...and if *ye* be Christ’s [by baptism into Him], then

are ye Abraham's seed and heirs". The very same ideas are then repeated a few verses later, but with the singular 'you': "And because *ye* are sons...wherefore *thou* art no more a servant but a son; and if a son [not 'sons'], then an [singular] heir of God through Christ" (Gal. 4:6,7); and just to press the point home, he reverts to speaking of "you" [plural] in the subsequent verses. It's as if Paul is talking generally, in the plural, of us all as a baptized community, heirs together of the promises, all in covenant relationship with God; but then he as it were swirls in upon us each individually; these promises really apply to us each one personally. And the outcome of this must be a deep seated joy and gratitude for God's grace.

Faith

Israel turned back in the day of battle, they lost their faith and nerve, because "they kept not the covenant" (Ps. 78:9). Keeping the covenant had an effect upon the crises of life. And keeping it was not a matter of mere outward obedience, it was rather a state of the heart. Thus "their heart was not right with him, neither were they faithful in his covenant" (Ps. 78:37). The covenants /promises made to Abraham and David above all take a grip upon the heart- and we have to keep remembering that those same covenants are made with all who are in Christ.

God In Covenant Relationship

We need to reflect also what it means for *God* to be in covenant relationship. God has allowed Himself to be bound, as any party is in some way bound once they enter such a relationship. In a sense, God gives up some freedom; for commitment and promise within a relationship involves some restrictions upon freedom. This ties in to the issues of how God appears at times to limit His power, His knowledge [cp. "surely they will reverence my son"], even His presence. God could exercise His sovereign and ultimate power, knowledge, foreknowledge etc., but the phenomena of His pain, hurt, surprise etc. all indicate that to some extent He chooses to limit them. To pass off these *many* descriptions of God's feelings as mere anthropomorphisms seems to me to miss the essential point- for even if they are not to be read dead literally, even if they are anthropomorphisms, what would be the point of them if they do not to some extent reflect the actual feelings and experience of God?

Relationships which have integrity involve some sharing of power. One party to the relationship will not overly dominate the other one, especially by the exercise of power and 'physical' advantage. And this giving up of legitimate power is, it seems to me, what God has done with those with whom He is in covenant relationship. Thus God can state His purpose, e.g. concerning the destruction of Israel and making of Moses a greater nation- but because He 'shared power' with Moses, Moses was able to reason with God and actually get Him to change that stated purpose. When God made a covenant with Abraham, He passed between the sacrificial victims in the form of a torch of fire (Gen. 15:17). According to the research of E.A. Speiser, it was the *weaker* of the two contracting parties that passed between the dead animals, in order to show that they wished to die as those animals had done if they broke the covenant (4). Now all this exemplifies what we have been saying here- that by entering into covenant relationship, God was allowing Himself to be weak; although He cannot die by nature, He was willing to envisage Himself dying, such was His desire to demonstrate to us [for we too have had the Abrahamic promise made to us] how sure and certain His covenant is. Remember how the book of Hosea portrays the marriage of a passionate prophet and a promiscuous prostitute. There was a huge inequality and imbalance in the relationship- the whore and the holy man, the prostitute and the prophet, were bound to have problems of

balance and inequality in coming together as a successful married couple. But this was all intend to reveal the covenant relationship between God and the faithless Israel whom He so deeply loved. And today with us, His love and the fickleness of human response remains the same tragedy. We complain to ourselves of the pain of our broken relationships [which, it seems to me, is the root of so much of our hurt]- and yet the more we enter into the pain of God as portrayed in the God / Israel, Hosea / Gomer relationship, we ought to end up asking ourselves: "Is my pain deeper, than the pain in *God's* heart?". God is the God of colossal forgiveness; and yet forgiveness can only be granted, it's only an item, a possibility, for One sensitive enough to feel the pain of having been wronged.

In the same way as God wishes us to enter fully into our covenant relationship with Him, He has very fully entered into the relationship with us. Ultimately He showed this in His even fuller entry into and understanding of human experience through the life and death of His Son, in whom He was supremely manifested. But even in the Old Testament, there are many examples of how God entered so painfully fully into the covenant relationship with His people.

God And Time

It's often been commented that God is beyond or even outside of our kind of time. God pre this present creation may have been like that, and He of course has the capacity and possibility to be like that. But it seems to me that particularly in connection with those with whom He is in relationship, He chooses to not exercise that possibility. Instead, God Almighty throws Himself into our experience, by limiting Himself to our kind of time- with all the suspense, hope, excitement, joy, disappointment which this involves. Time and again we read of how God says He is "shaping evil against you and devising a plan" against His enemies (Jer. 18:11; Jer. 26:3; Jer. 49:20,30; Jer. 50:45; Mic. 2:3; 4:12). For the faithful, He says that He is making plans for them for good and not for evil, "to give you a future" (Jer. 29:11). The Lord Jesus had this sort of thing in mind when He spoke of how the Kingdom will have been being *prepared* for the faithful from the beginning of the world (Mt. 25:34; Mt. 20:23). John the Baptist was to "prepare" the way for the Lord's coming- evidently a process- in reflection of how God had been working a long time to "prepare" [same Greek word] the way for His Son's coming (Lk. 1:76; Lk. 2:31; Lk. 3:4). We likewise, in our preaching work in these last days, are working in tandem and in step with God. The idea of God 'preparing' implies that there is therefore a gap between the plan being made, and it being executed- hence "The Lord has both planned and done what He spoke concerning the inhabitants of Babylon" (Jer. 51:12; Jer. 4:28; Lam. 2:17; Is. 22:11; Is. 37:26; Zech. 1:6; Zech. 8:14).

This 'gap' is significant when we come to consider the idea of God's 'repentance' or change of mind- stating something is going to happen, but then changing His mind because of human behaviour during the 'time gap' between the statement and its' execution. All we can say is that past, present and future are meaningful and significant for God. We read of God 'remembering' His covenant (Ex. 2:24; Lev. 26:42; Jer. 14:10,21); and of God 'not remembering' of forgetting the sins of His covenant people (Is. 43:25; Jer. 31:34). If words mean anything, this surely implies that sins which God once remembered, He then stops remembering and 'forgets'. Such language seems on one hand inappropriate to the God who by nature doesn't have to forget and can recall all things. But my point is, that He has willingly entered into the meaning of time which is experienced by those with whom He is in covenant relationship. He allows Himself to genuinely feel it like it is. The 'gap' between God

stating His plan and its actual fulfillment is the opportunity for men and women to plead with Him, as Moses did, as Abraham did regarding Sodom (Gen. 18:17-22), as so many have done... and He is most definitely open to human persuasion. Because He is in covenant with us, and this relationship involves a sharing of power, a respect and 'hearing' of each other. The very use of the terms 'remembering' and 'forgetting' suggest God is so fully willing to enter into our kind of time; for a Being cannot forget and remember simultaneously, an element of time is involved. Likewise at times we read of God being slow to anger (Ex. 34:6), at others, of Him not restraining His anger, or restraining it (Ps. 78:38; Is. 48:9; Lam. 2:8; Ez. 20:22), and holding His peace (Is. 57:11; Ps. 50:21), and being provoked to anger by the bad behaviour of His covenant people (Dt. 32:21; Ps. 78:58; Is. 65:3; Jer. 8:19). God clearly has emotions of a kind which are not unrelated to the emotions we experience, as beings made in His image. But those emotions involve a time factor in order to be emotions. We read of the anger of God "for a moment" (Ps. 30:5; Is. 54:7,8), and of His wrath coming and going, leaving Him "calm" and no longer angry (Ez. 16:42). When we sin, we provoke God to anger- i.e. at a point in time, God sees our sin, and becomes angry. This is attested many times in Scripture. But it's meaningless if God is somehow outside of our time and emotions.

What Might Have Been

Although God presents Himself to us as having a memory which functions not unlike our memories, who are made in His image, there is with God the capacity for total recall of history; and hence His pain is far greater than ours, not least because He knows, with all the power of infinite analysis of possibilities, 'what might have been'. And it is the 'what might have been' syndrome which is one of the greatest sources of our emotional pain. His pain and hurt is therefore and thereby so much greater than ours. Hence the pain, the pain which comes from understanding and the potential of total recall, behind Jer. 2:2: "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness". God recalls how "When Israel was a child... the more I called them, the more they went from me... yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk" (Hos. 11). His love, like any parent, is simply such that He can't let go of the memories. He saw how they *could have been* sons which made Him proud, a faithful wife: "I thought how I would set you among my sons... I thought you would call me, My Father... surely as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so have you been faithless to me, O house of Israel" (Jer. 3:19,20). God's knowledge of possible futures is brought out several times in Jeremiah. He considered how even if Coniah were the signet upon His right hand, yet He would still have to uproot Israel (Jer. 22:24). He fantasized about how if the prophets had been faithful and if Israel had heard them, then Israel would have repented (Jer. 23:22). Because of His capacity to imagine, to see possible futures to some extent, God feels rejected both by His children and by His wife at the same time. Hence the poignancy behind His words in places like Is. 48:18: "O that you had hearkened to my commandments!", "Oh that they would have a mind such as this always" (Dt. 5:29), "O Israel, if you would but listen to me" (Ps. 81:8,13). It's as if He could see the potentially happy future which they could've had stretching out before Him.

God's experience with the Jews in exile was a classic example. He set them up with the possibility to return to Judah, to establish there a Messianic-style Kingdom, giving them the commands in Ez. 40-47 for a glorious temple; but most of them preferred the soft life in Babylon, and those who did return proved small minded, selfish and disinterested in the vision of God's glory. In this context, Isaiah ends his restoration prophecies on a tragic note from God: "I was ready to be sought... I was ready to be found" (Is. 65:1) by the unspiritual exiles in Babylon. But Israel would not. He pictures Himself standing there crying "Here am

I, here am I!"- to be rejected by a people more interested in climbing the endless economic and social ladder in Babylon and Persia.

The pain that arises from knowing what might have been is so poignantly brought out by the grief of Martha and Mary over their brother's death- they knew that if Jesus had have been there, Lazarus wouldn't have died (Jn. 11:21,32). Jesus as God's Son had something of this ability to see what might have been- hence He could state with absolute confidence that if Gentile Tyre and Sidon had witnessed His miracles, they would've repented in sackcloth and ashes (Lk. 10:13). He lamented with pain over the fact that things would have been so much better for Jerusalem if she had only known / apprehended the things which would bring her ultimate peace (Lk. 19:42). The Lord Jesus was deeply pained at what might have been, if the things of God's Kingdom had not remained willfully hidden from Israel's perception. His pain was because of realizing what might have been. In this He was directly reflecting the mind of His Father, who had previously lamented over Jerusalem: "O that you had hearkened to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river" (Is. 48:18).

God in fact wants us to be independent, as good parents wish for their children; He wants us to serve Him on our initiative and not merely obey a set of legal codes. Thus He carries us an eagle teaching its young to fly, pushing them out of the nest, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them (Ex. 19:4; Ps. 17:8; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4). The pushing out of the nest in Israel's context refers to their leaving Egypt (cp. baptism for us); and throughout the wilderness journey the Father was teaching them to fly independently. But does God know in advance every failure we will commit? It seems to me that He doesn't, for in our efforts to 'learn to fly', we have freewill- the whole enterprise could go this way, or that, or the other.

Does God Limit His Foreknowledge?

This leads in to the implications that God doesn't actually know for sure how His people will respond to His word. The limitation of God is shown by how He speaks about prayer: "The Lord's... ear [is not] dull, that it *cannot* hear... your sins have hid His face from you so that He *will not* hear" (Is. 59:1,2). In this sense God limits His possibilities. He *can* see all things, and yet in the time of Israel's apostasy He hides His face from them (Mic. 3:4 cp. Dt. 32:19,20). The Hebrew word *ulay*, 'perhaps', is significant in this connection. "Perhaps they will understand", God says, in reflection upon Ezekiel's preaching ministry to God's people (Ez. 12:1-3). Of Jeremiah's prophetic work, God likewise comments: "It may be [Heb. *ulay*] they will listen" (Jer. 26:2,3; Jer. 36:3,7; Jer. 51:8; Is. 47:12). This uncertainty of God as to how His people will respond to His word reflects the degree to which He has accommodated Himself to our kind of time. It has huge implications for us, too. With what eagerness must God Almighty look upon us as we sit down to read His word daily! 'Are they going to listen? How are they going to respond?'

It's this which gives our relationship with God Almighty the dynamism and excitement and importance which is beyond us to paint in words. One has to experience it. It's all this which makes Bible reading, study and response to it so thrilling. This feature of our God enables Him to legitimately express a sense of hopefulness in His people, and therefore also, all the pain of disappointment and dashed hopes and expectations. Take Jer. 3:7,19: "I thought 'After she has done all this she will return to me'; but she did not return. I thought how I would set you among my sons and give you a pleasant land... And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me [But] as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so have you been faithless to me, O house of Israel". So on one hand, God *can* know the future.

But it seems to me that so often, He chooses not to, and like us, faces futures which are in some sense unknown. Perhaps this explains God's apparent experimentation to find Adam a "helpmeet" in Gen. 2. The very thought that we can break the heart of God with disappointment surely motivates us to serve Him and be faithful and responsive to His word. Think of God's bitter disappointment with Israel when He invites Moses into the mount as their representative, in order to enter into further covenant with them. Down below, they started worshipping other gods. When God says to Moses "Leave me alone..." (Ex. 32:10), He may well refer to the desire for isolation / solitude which a person in extreme grief desires. And of course we are aware of how Moses reasons with God, and asks God to consider His own future and how it might turn out, and how that can be avoided. And God takes Moses seriously, with integrity, and appears to even acquiesce to his arguments. It's amazing. This God is our God.

We have another example in Samuel- God tells Samuel of His rejection of Saul, and Samuel cries to Him all night. I think the implication is that Samuel was pleading with God to consider another future with Saul (1 Sam. 15:11,35; 16:1). Amos 7:1-6 is another case- God reveals His intention regarding Israel, but then Amos makes a case against this and is heard. In fact, these and other examples suggest that this is almost a pattern with God- to devise His purpose, and then in the 'gap' until its fulfillment, be open to the persuasion of His covenant people to change or amend those plans. This could be what Am. 3:7 is speaking of: "Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets". It's as if He reveals His plans to them *so that* they can then comment upon them in prayer. And maybe this is why God tells Jeremiah not to pray to Him to change His stated plans against Israel (Jer. 7:16 cp. Jer. 11:14; 14:11; 15:1), and why He asks Moses to 'leave Me alone' and not try to persuade Him to change His mind (Ex. 32:10). He didn't want, in these cases, His stated plans to be interrupted by the appeals of His people to change them. Interestingly, in both these examples, Moses and Jeremiah know God well enough, the relationship is intimate enough, for them to *still* speak with Him- and change His mind. Those who've prayed to God in cases of terminal illness [and countless other situations] will have sensed this 'battle', this 'struggle' almost, between God and His friends, His covenant people, and the element of 'persuasion' which there is going on *both* ways in the dialogue between God and ourselves. The simple fact that God really can change- there are over 40 references to His 'repentance' in Scripture- is vital to understand- for this is the basis of the prayer that changes things, that as it were wrestles with God.

And all this opens another window on the self-questioning which is associated with God- e.g. "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?" (Hos. 6:4; Hos. 11:8); or "How can I pardon you? Shall I not punish them for these things?" (Jer. 5:7,9,29; Jer. 9:7,9). Viewed from the understanding I've been exploring, such passages cease to be purely rhetorical questions- they come to reflect the actual and real self-questioning of Almighty God, reflective as it is of the turbulence of emotion which is part and parcel of being in a relationship which has gone painfully wrong. There even seems at times a difficulty on God's part to understand why the people He had loved could hate Him so much: "Have I been a wilderness to Israel, or a land of thick darkness? Why then do my people say, We will no more come to thee?" (Jer. 2:31); "Why then has this people turned away?" (Jer. 8:5); "Why have they provoked me to anger?" (Jer. 8:19; Jer. 2:14; Jer. 30:6; Is. 5:4; Is. 50:2). "What more could I have done for my vineyard... why did it yield wild grapes?" (Is. 5:1-7). This is so much the anguished cry of bewildered middle age parents as they reflect upon a wayward child. This Divine struggle to understand reflects the extraordinary depth of His love for them; and it warns us in chilling terms as to the pain we can cause God if we spurn His amazing love. Jer. 8:4-7 records God

reflecting that even the stork 'returns' predictably; but His people have inexplicably not returned to Him. This reveals a powerful thing- that our rejection of God's love is inexplicable even to God Himself. And yet mankind persists in this utter madness. For all our education, business sense, scientific knowledge- we are revealed as inexplicably foolish in rejecting God's love and not 'returning' [repenting] to Him.

Equipped with this understanding, a new window opens upon the "Woe...!" passages in the prophets. The Hebrew word doesn't really imply 'Woe to you, you'd better watch out for what's coming on you!'; rather is it an expression used to express the pain of the speaker over a broken relationship, e.g. at a funeral. And yet the pain of God leads Him to hope, even desperate hope; and again that hope is expressed and felt in terms which are relative to our kind of time. Hence His many questions relating to 'How long?': "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe me?" (Num. 14:11,27); "How long will it be till they are pure?" (Hos. 8:5; Jer. 4:14; 13:27). These aren't merely rhetorical questions. There's an element of literality about God's question- He doesn't know how long it will be, He can only imagine and hope- for Israel has free will, and will not turn to Him just when He says so. For He is in covenant relationship with them, He loves them, and as we've emphasized, that must involve each party allowing the other to function independently and to have their own time and free choice for returning. These questions, and other similar statements from God, are almost God's probing of possible paths into the future- the future which He could, of course, choose to know, but it seems He chooses not to fully know.

All the above indicates that God has allowed Himself to be made vulnerable. Love, promises, covenant relationship, feeling for others, revealing yourself to the object of your love- this is all part of what it means for God to enter covenant relationship with us. The vulnerability and sensitivity of God is reflected in the way that He is concerned that His covenant people, His wife, who bears His Name, might profane His Name (Lev. 19:12; Ex. 20:7; Dt. 5:11). His repeated concern that His Name be taken in vain doesn't simply refer to the casual use of the word "God" as an expression of exasperation. God is concerned about His people taking His Name upon themselves (Num. 6:27) in vain- i.e., marrying Him, entering covenant relationship with Him, taking on His Name- but not being serious about that relationship, taking it on as a vain thing, like a woman who casually marries a man who loves her at the very core of his being, when for her, it's just a casual thing and she lives a profligate and adulterous life as his wife. When God revealed His Name to His people, opening up the very essence of His character to them, He was making Himself vulnerable. We reveal ourselves intimately to another because we wish for them to make a response to us, to love us for what we revealed to them. God revealed Himself to Israel, He sought for intimacy in the covenant relationship, and therefore was and is all the more hurt when His people turn away from Him, after having revealed to them all the wonders of His word (Hos. 8:12). God revealed Himself to Israel alone, in all the detail of His law and prophets (Am. 3:2). And they didn't want Him. Hence His very deep hurt; and also, His excited joy that we grasp that same word with eager minds and seek to love, understand and serve Him faithfully to the end. Given the rejection experienced by God, and the genuine and very real nature of His emotional response to it, it's natural that He would earnestly seek another relationship- and this is just the huge emotional energy He puts into searching for His new bride. He so wants intimacy, a relationship of meaning and mutuality. In our efforts to help each other perceive that, in our sharing of His word with the world and with other believers, in our efforts to help people get baptized into covenant with Him... we are working in step with His earnest desire for relationship with people. And He will bless our efforts. And as we seek to root out of our lives and characters

those things which come between us and Him, we likewise will enjoy His very special and joyful blessing and empowerment.

The Pain Of God In The Cross

The things we have discussed above lead us ultimately towards another window onto the sufferings of God in the death of His beloved Son. God speaks of being burdened by Israel's sins (Is. 43:24)- and yet this is a prelude to the passages which speak of the Lord Jesus bearing our sins on the cross (Is. 53:4,11,12). We even read of God being wearied by Israel's sins (Is. 7:13; Jer. 15:6; Ez. 24:12; Mal. 2:17). Even though God does not "grow weary" (Is. 40:28) by nature, it seems to me that in His full entering into His people's situation, He does allow Himself to grow weary with the sins of those with whom He is in covenant relationship. It was this kind of capacity which God has which was supremely revealed in His 'sharing in' the crucifixion of His Son. God's long term 'holding His peace' at Israel's sins resulted in a build up of internal forces within God: "For a long time have I held my peace... restrained myself, now will I cry out like a woman in travail, I will gasp and pant" (Is. 42:14; 63:15; 64:12). God crying out, gasping, panting... leads straight on, in the context, to the suffering servant. This is the same idea as God's heart growing warm and being kindled in internal struggle about His people in Hos. 11:8,9. And all this went on supremely at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus. I have [elsewhere](#) commented upon the very intense connection between Father and Son at that time. Crucifixion meant humiliation. God's experience with Israel had led to His humiliation before the nations. For example, seeing the ark represented the very presence of God, the capture of the ark was in a sense the capture of God (1 Sam. 5:7,11 cp. 4:7). Ps. 78:61 comments: "He delivered his power to captivity, his glory to the hand of the foe"

In the death of Jesus we see the Son whom God had so dearly hoped His people would reverence- but they rejected Him. As something of each of us dies in the death of those we love, so "God was in Christ", sharing in His sufferings and death. It was not of course that God died. But He fully shared in the sufferings of His Son unto death. There is in the Hebrew text of Jud. 10:16 something which defies translation. We read there that God was so hurt by Israel's sufferings that in sympathy with them, "His *nephesh* ["soul"] was shortened" or expended. The phrase is used in Num. 21:4 and Jud. 16:16 about death or the diminishment of life. God's pain was such that this was how He felt, because He so internalized the sufferings of His people. And how much more in the death of His Son? He even feels like that for the sufferings of Gentiles- in the same way as Moab would weep for their slain sons, so God says that *His* heart would cry out for Moab, "therefore I weep [along] with the weeping of Jazer... my soul moans like a lyre for Moab" (Is. 15:5; Is. 16:9,11). God "pitied" Nineveh- a Hebrew word meaning to pity with tears (Jonah 4:11). The mourning of the prophets over Tyre (Ez. 27:1) and Babylon (Is. 21:3,4) was an embodiment of God's grief even over those not in covenant with Him. And how much more does He weep and suffer with His people Israel in their sufferings (Jer. 12:12; 23:10; Hos. 4:2,3); "my heart yearns / moans for him" (Jer. 31:20). Note in the context of Jer. 31:20 how Rachel is weeping for her children and would not be comforted, and then God as it were takes up that weeping for the same children (Jer. 31:15,20). God mourns over the fact that He can see in the future how His people will be mourning their children in the streets (Am. 5:17,18). In all this we see that God is not only a judge, but a judge who suffers with those to whom He gives punishment. And yet how much more did He weep for His beloved Son, suffering as He did *not* because He had sinned. And He weeps for us too in our weeping. There are tears and the yearnings of

God in Heaven. We are told to weep with those that weep- and this is a reflection of how God weeps for and with us.

The Urgent Desire Of God For Us

The urgent desire of the Father and Son for us, for our spiritual growth, is so great that it involves them in an element of dynamism in their relationship with us. They're not merely passively awaiting our efforts to please them, grow in appreciation of them, and adopting their spirit as ours. As in any truly legitimate, inter-personal relationship, there's an element of dynamism; nothing can remain still, expectations and hopes rise, are dashed, delayed or realized, with all the emotions that are involved.

The Lord Jesus won't turn over a different face tomorrow when judgment day comes. He's the same yesterday as today as for ever. The spirit He showed in His ministry and which He reveals today, will be the same He operates by at the judgment encounter. The eagerness of the Lord to accept us, to find in us spiritual fruit, is perhaps reflected in the way that He begins inviting people of 'His' level to the feast of the Kingdom, but ends up lowering the bar as time goes on, to try by all means to get at least somebody in there (Lk. 14:21-23). This theme of lowering the bar is perhaps continued in that same passage by the way the Lord says that His disciples must forsake / 'bid goodbye to' all that they had (Lk. 14:33). This is the same word found earlier in Lk. 9:61, where some time before, a potential disciple who first wished to go and "bid goodbye to" his family was judged as not suitably committed to the urgency of the task. But now, the Lord says that this is acceptable in His definition of discipleship. This Lord is our Lord.

Think of how *eager* the Father and Son have been to find spiritual fruit in us. Through the centuries of His involvement with Israel, God had expected to find the fruit of justice in the vineyard of Israel- but He found only poison berries (Is. 5:4), instead of justice He found abuse and oppression of others (Is. 5:7). And all that despite doing absolutely all He could for that vineyard. But according to Mt. 21:34-38, this didn't stop Him from having a hopeful, fruit-seeking attitude. He sent His servants the prophets to find the fruit- but they were beaten and murdered. He finally sent His Son, reasoning that "*surely* they will reverence my son" (Mt. 21:37). But they murdered Him. I have suggested elsewhere that this language can only suggest that God in some sense limited His omniscience and omnipotence in order to fully enter into our dimensions; and hence His experience of dashed hope and deep disappointment. Amazing as the Father's hopefulness was, His Son's was even greater. This Father who had had all this experience of simply not getting any fruit, asked His vinedresser (the Lord Jesus) to cut down the tree of Israel, as for the three years of Christ's ministry He had sought fruit from them and not found any; and further, this tree was 'cumbering the ground', taking away nutrients which He could have given to another (Gentile) tree. But His servant argues back with Him; the servant asks to be allowed to dig and dung around the tree; and then, he says, '*You* can cut it down, although you asked *me* to do this job'. This was quite unusual for a servant to talk like this; but it's an insight into the way the Lord Jesus was even more hopeful than His longsuffering Father. The Lord was prepared to dig around the tree- and digging was the lowest, most shameful occupation (Lk. 16:3). Further, He would shovel dung, making Him unclean and despised of men. He *so* wanted fruit on Israel. This describes the intense effort of the Lord Jesus during the last six months of His ministry. His attitude was summarized when shortly before He died, He came hungry to a fig tree, expecting to find just the immature beginnings of fruit there, which He would gladly have eaten. But that particular tree had nothing on it. His deep hunger and willingness to eat anything reflected

His willingness to find some spirituality from Israel. But He "found none", just as there was "not found" any of those Jews He healed who would glorify God (Lk. 17:18 s.w. Lk. 13:6). This longsuffering, patient, passionate desire for spiritual fruit in the Lord Jesus is presented as being even stronger than it was in His Father. No wonder John the Baptist misunderstood things- he proclaimed that Jesus already had the axe aimed at the bottom of the trees (Mt. 3:10; Lk. 3:9), and was about to fell them. The situation truly demanded this- but actually the Lord Jesus waited three years for fruit, and when it didn't come, even then He pleaded with the Father not to fell the tree but let Him dig and dung it... We must factor all this into our understanding of Mt. 7:19, where the Lord apparently in a bland, matter-of-fact manner teaches that the tree that doesn't bear good fruit will be hewn down and burnt. This burning is ultimately at the judgment day; but all our lives He is earnestly seeking to develop spiritual fruit upon us; as in the parable of the sower, only those who produce totally nothing will be rejected. Of course our fruit must be the fruit that abides- the changes in personality which are permanent, the converts who remain, the forgiveness which is maintained on a felt level, the generosity never later regretted... But if there's even something of this, then it seems this is what the Lord is so eagerly seeking. Earlier, Israel were the vine and the Lord Jesus the vinedresser (Lk. 13:7). But now *we* are the vine, and God Himself the vinedresser (Jn. 15:1). We are in good hands; and the Father and Son who through Biblical history showed themselves so sensitive to spiritual fruit are the very same ones who will meet us in the last day.

God's Forgiveness

God is outstanding in His forgiveness of us. But what *is* forgiveness? It worries me that so many of us actually haven't thought through basic questions like this. It seems to me that forgiveness is far more than a vague decision in the mind; I like the definition of forgiveness which my wife thought up, and which I jotted down as profound: "A valuing of the relationship more than and above the hurt caused by the sin". It is on the basis of His *relationship* with us, and His valuing of that relationship so highly, as a covenant relationship, which empowers God to forgive us so wonderfully. And the same should hold true for us in our forgiveness of others in covenant relationship with us.

Reflection upon the nature of God's covenant relationship reveals His grace. There are no lack of Bible passages which speak of His love and blessing in the covenant as being conditional- *if* the people were obedient, then God would keep His covenant "and he will love thee and bless thee and multiply thee" (Dt. 7:13). Yet the record of the history of Israel shows that Israel were not obedient; and yet God still kept His covenant, loved them and multiplied them. It's rather like a parent setting conditions for a child, and yet not abiding by the deal, so great is the love felt for the child. God's covenant is in a sense conditional; and yet in another sense it isn't, because His love has the characteristic of unconditionality about it, simply because we are His children. The whole history of Israel is encouragement in this.

Notes

(1) E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* [The Anchor Bible] (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 171.

(2) N.T. Wright, *Jesus And The Victory Of God* (London: S.P.C.K., 2004) p. 273.

(3) David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1992).

(4) E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* [The Anchor Bible] (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 112.

God In Covenant Relationship

We need to reflect also what it means for *God* to be in covenant relationship. God has allowed Himself to be bound, as any party is in some way bound once they enter such a relationship. In a sense, God gives up some freedom; for commitment and promise within a relationship involves some restrictions upon freedom. This ties in to the issues of how God appears at times to limit His power, His knowledge [cp. "surely they will reverence my son"], even His presence. God could exercise His sovereign and ultimate power, knowledge, foreknowledge etc., but the phenomena of His pain, hurt, surprise etc. all indicate that to some extent He chooses to limit them. To pass off these *many* descriptions of God's feelings as mere anthropomorphisms seems to me to miss the essential point- for even if they are not to be read dead literally, even if they are anthropomorphisms, what would be the point of them if they do not to some extent reflect the actual feelings and experience of God?

Relationships which have integrity involve some sharing of power. One party to the relationship will not overly dominate the other one, especially by the exercise of power and 'physical' advantage. And this giving up of legitimate power is, it seems to me, what God has done with those with whom He is in covenant relationship. Thus God can state His purpose, e.g. concerning the destruction of Israel and making of Moses a greater nation- but because He 'shared power' with Moses, Moses was able to reason with God and actually get Him to change that stated purpose. When God made a covenant with Abraham, He passed between the sacrificial victims in the form of a torch of fire (Gen. 15:17). According to the research of E.A. Speiser, it was the *weaker* of the two contracting parties that passed between the dead animals, in order to show that they wished to die as those animals had done if they broke the covenant (3). Now all this exemplifies what we have been saying here- that by entering into covenant relationship, God was allowing Himself to be weak; although He cannot die by nature, He was willing to envisage Himself dying, such was His desire to demonstrate to us [for we too have had the Abrahamic promise made to us] how sure and certain His covenant is. Remember how the book of Hosea portrays the marriage of a passionate prophet and a promiscuous prostitute. There was a huge inequality and imbalance in the relationship- the whore and the holy man, the prostitute and the prophet, were bound to have problems of balance and inequality in coming together as a successful married couple. But this was all intend to reveal the covenant relationship between God and the faithless Israel whom He so deeply loved. And today with us, His love and the fickleness of human response remains the same tragedy. We complain to ourselves of the pain of our broken relationships [which, it seems to me, is the root of so much of our hurt]- and yet the more we enter into the pain of God as portrayed in the God / Israel, Hosea / Gomer relationship, we ought to end up asking ourselves: "Is my pain deeper, than the pain in *God's* heart?". God is the God of colossal forgiveness; and yet forgiveness can only be granted, it's only an item, a possibility, for One sensitive enough to feel the pain of having been wronged.

In the same way as God wishes us to enter fully into our covenant relationship with Him, He has very fully entered into the relationship with us. Ultimately He showed this in His even fuller entry into and understanding of human experience through the life and death of His Son, in whom He was supremely manifested. But even in the Old Testament, there are many

examples of how God entered so painfully fully into the covenant relationship with His people.

God And Time

It's often been commented that God is beyond or even outside of our kind of time. God pre this present creation may have been like that, and He of course has the capacity and possibility to be like that. But it seems to me that particularly in connection with those with whom He is in relationship, He chooses to not exercise that possibility. Instead, God Almighty throws Himself into our experience, by limiting Himself to our kind of time- with all the suspense, hope, excitement, joy, disappointment which this involves. Time and again we read of how God says He is "shaping evil against you and devising a plan" against His enemies (Jer. 18:11; Jer. 26:3; Jer. 49:20,30; Jer. 50:45; Mic. 2:3; 4:12). For the faithful, He says that He is making plans for them for good and not for evil, "to give you a future" (Jer. 29:11). The Lord Jesus had this sort of thing in mind when He spoke of how the Kingdom will have been being *prepared* for the faithful from the beginning of the world (Mt. 25:34; Mt. 20:23). John the Baptist was to "prepare" the way for the Lord's coming- evidently a process- in reflection of how God had been working a long time to "prepare" [same Greek word] the way for His Son's coming (Lk. 1:76; Lk. 2:31; Lk. 3:4). We likewise, in our preaching work in these last days, are working in tandem and in step with God. The idea of God 'preparing' implies that there is therefore a gap between the plan being made, and it being executed- hence "The Lord has both planned and done what He spoke concerning the inhabitants of Babylon" (Jer. 51:12; Jer. 4:28; Lam. 2:17; Is. 22:11; Is. 37:26; Zech. 1:6; Zech. 8:14).

This 'gap' is significant when we come to consider the idea of God's 'repentance' or change of mind- stating something is going to happen, but then changing His mind because of human behaviour during the 'time gap' between the statement and its' execution. All we can say is that past, present and future are meaningful and significant for God. We read of God 'remembering' His covenant (Ex. 2:24; Lev. 26:42; Jer. 14:10,21); and of God 'not remembering' or forgetting the sins of His covenant people (Is. 43:25; Jer. 31:34). If words mean anything, this surely implies that sins which God once remembered, He then stops remembering and 'forgets'. Such language seems on one hand inappropriate to the God who by nature doesn't have to forget and can recall all things. But my point is, that He has willingly entered into the meaning of time which is experienced by those with whom He is in covenant relationship. He allows Himself to genuinely feel it like it is. The 'gap' between God stating His plan and its actual fulfillment is the opportunity for men and women to plead with Him, as Moses did, as Abraham did regarding Sodom (Gen. 18:17-22), as so many have done... and He is most definitely open to human persuasion. Because He is in covenant with us, and this relationship involves a sharing of power, a respect and 'hearing' of each other. The very use of the terms 'remembering' and 'forgetting' suggest God is so fully willing to enter into our kind of time; for a Being cannot forget and remember simultaneously, an element of time is involved. Likewise at times we read of God being slow to anger (Ex. 34:6), at others, of Him not restraining His anger, or restraining it (Ps. 78:38; Is. 48:9; Lam. 2:8; Ez. 20:22), and holding His peace (Is. 57:11; Ps. 50:21), and being provoked to anger by the bad behaviour of His covenant people (Dt. 32:21; Ps. 78:58; Is. 65:3; Jer. 8:19). God clearly has emotions of a kind which are not unrelated to the emotions we experience, as beings made in His image. But those emotions involve a time factor in order to be emotions. We read of the anger of God "for a moment" (Ps. 30:5; Is. 54:7,8), and of His wrath coming and going, leaving Him "calm" and no longer angry (Ez. 16:42). When we sin, we provoke God to

anger- i.e. at a point in time, God sees our sin, and becomes angry. This is attested many times in Scripture. But it's meaningless if God is somehow outside of our time and emotions.

What Might Have Been

Although God presents Himself to us as having a memory which functions not unlike our memories, who are made in His image, there is with God the capacity for total recall of history; and hence His pain is far greater than ours, not least because He knows, with all the power of infinite analysis of possibilities, 'what might have been'. And it is the 'what might have been' syndrome which is one of the greatest sources of our emotional pain. His pain and hurt is therefore and thereby so much greater than ours. Hence the pain, the pain which comes from understanding and the potential of total recall, behind Jer. 2:2: "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness". God recalls how "When Israel was a child... the more I called them, the more they went from me... yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk" (Hos. 11). His love, like any parent, is simply such that He can't let go of the memories. He saw how they *could have been* sons which made Him proud, a faithful wife: "I thought how I would set you among my sons... I thought you would call me, My Father... surely as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so have you been faithless to me, O house of Israel" (Jer. 3:19,20). God's knowledge of possible futures is brought out several times in Jeremiah. He considered how even if Coniah were the signet upon His right hand, yet He would still have to uproot Israel (Jer. 22:24). He fantasized about how if the prophets had been faithful and if Israel had heard them, then Israel would have repented (Jer. 23:22). Because of His capacity to imagine, to see possible futures to some extent, God feels rejected both by His children and by His wife at the same time. Hence the poignancy behind His words in places like Is. 48:18: "O that you had hearkened to my commandments!", "Oh that they would have a mind such as this always" (Dt. 5:29), "O Israel, if you would but listen to me" (Ps. 81:8,13). It's as if He could see the potentially happy future which they could've had stretching out before Him. We can better understand the sadness with which God had to tell Hophni and Phinehas: "I thought this, that your house, and the house of your father, would eternally serve Me: But now, the Lord, says, Be it far from Me; for them that honour Me I will honour, and they that despise Me shall be despised" (1 Sam. 2:30). Note how God opened His heart to those who had so hurt Him, at the very time they had hurt Him- just as Paul did to Corinth. Such sharing of dashed hopes with those who have dashed them seems to be part of what condemnation is all about; and, given Paul's doing this to the Corinthians, it is perhaps even a useful tool for we who cannot condemn others, but may need to walk separately from them in this life.

God's experience with the Jews in exile was a classic example. He set them up with the possibility to return to Judah, to establish there a Messianic-style Kingdom, giving them the commands in Ez. 40-47 for a glorious temple; but most of them preferred the soft life in Babylon, and those who did return proved small minded, selfish and disinterested in the vision of God's glory. In this context, Isaiah ends his restoration prophecies on a tragic note from God: "I was ready to be sought... I was ready to be found" (Is. 65:1) by the unspiritual exiles in Babylon. But Israel would not. He pictures Himself standing there crying "Here am I, here am I!"- to be rejected by a people more interested in climbing the endless economic and social ladder in Babylon and Persia.

The pain that arises from knowing what might have been is so poignantly brought out by the grief of Martha and Mary over their brother's death- they knew that if Jesus had have been there, Lazarus wouldn't have died (Jn. 11:21,32). Jesus as God's Son had something of this

ability to see what might have been- hence He could state with absolute confidence that if Gentile Tyre and Sidon had witnessed His miracles, they would've repented in sackcloth and ashes (Lk. 10:13). He lamented with pain over the fact that things would have been so much better for Jerusalem if she had only known / apprehended the things which would bring her ultimate peace (Lk. 19:42). The Lord Jesus was deeply pained at what might have been, if the things of God's Kingdom had not remained willfully hidden from Israel's perception. His pain was because of realizing what might have been. In this He was directly reflecting the mind of His Father, who had previously lamented over Jerusalem: "O that you had hearkened to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river" (Is. 48:18).

God in fact wants us to be independent, as good parents wish for their children; He wants us to serve Him on our initiative and not merely obey a set of legal codes. Thus He carries us an eagle teaching its young to fly, pushing them out of the nest, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them (Ex. 19:4; Ps. 17:8; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4). The pushing out of the nest in Israel's context refers to their leaving Egypt (cp. baptism for us); and throughout the wilderness journey the Father was teaching them to fly independently. But does God know in advance every failure we will commit? It seems to me that He doesn't, for in our efforts to 'learn to fly', we have freewill- the whole enterprise could go this way, or that, or the other.

Does God Limit His Foreknowledge?

This leads in to the implications that God doesn't actually know for sure how His people will respond to His word. The limitation of God is shown by how He speaks about prayer: "The Lord's... ear [is not] dull, that it *cannot* hear... your sins have hid His face from you so that He *will not* hear" (Is. 59:1,2). In this sense God limits His possibilities. He *can* see all things, and yet in the time of Israel's apostasy He hides His face from them (Mic. 3:4 cp. Dt. 32:19,20). The Hebrew word *ulay*, 'perhaps', is significant in this connection. "Perhaps they will understand", God says, in reflection upon Ezekiel's preaching ministry to God's people (Ez. 12:1-3). Of Jeremiah's prophetic work, God likewise comments: "It may be [Heb. *ulay*] they will listen" (Jer. 26:2,3; Jer. 36:3,7; Jer. 51:8; Is. 47:12). This uncertainty of God as to how His people will respond to His word reflects the degree to which He has accommodated Himself to our kind of time. It has huge implications for us, too. With what eagerness must God Almighty look upon us as we sit down to read His word daily! 'Are they going to listen? How are they going to respond?'

It's this which gives our relationship with God Almighty the dynamism and excitement and importance which is beyond us to paint in words. One has to experience it. It's all this which makes Bible reading, study and response to it so thrilling. This feature of our God enables Him to legitimately express a sense of hopefulness in His people, and therefore also, all the pain of disappointment and dashed hopes and expectations. Take Jer. 3:7,19: "I thought 'After she has done all this she will return to me'; but she did not return. I thought how I would set you among my sons and give you a pleasant land... And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me [But] as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so have you been faithless to me, O house of Israel". So on one hand, God *can* know the future. But it seems to me that so often, He chooses not to, and like us, faces futures which are in some sense unknown. Perhaps this explains God's apparent experimentation to find Adam a "helpmeet" in Gen. 2. The very thought that we can break the heart of God with disappointment surely motivates us to serve Him and be faithful and responsive to His word. Think of God's bitter disappointment with Israel when He invites Moses into the mount as their representative, in order to enter into further covenant with them. Down below, they

started worshipping other gods. When God says to Moses "Leave me alone..." (Ex. 32:10), He may well refer to the desire for isolation / solitude which a person in extreme grief desires. And of course we are aware of how Moses reasons with God, and asks God to consider His own future and how it might turn out, and how that can be avoided. And God takes Moses seriously, with integrity, and appears to even acquiesce to his arguments. It's amazing. This God is our God.

We have another example in Samuel- God tells Samuel of His rejection of Saul, and Samuel cries to Him all night. I think the implication is that Samuel was pleading with God to consider another future with Saul (1 Sam. 15:11,35; 16:1). Amos 7:1-6 is another case- God reveals His intention regarding Israel, but then Amos makes a case against this and is heard. In fact, these and other examples suggest that this is almost a pattern with God- to devise His purpose, and then in the 'gap' until its fulfillment, be open to the persuasion of His covenant people to change or amend those plans. This could be what Am. 3:7 is speaking of: "Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets". It's as if He reveals His plans to them *so that* they can then comment upon them in prayer. And maybe this is why God tells Jeremiah not to pray to Him to change His stated plans against Israel (Jer. 7:16 cp. Jer. 11:14; 14:11; 15:1), and why He asks Moses to 'leave Me alone' and not try to persuade Him to change His mind (Ex. 32:10). He didn't want, in these cases, His stated plans to be interrupted by the appeals of His people to change them. Interestingly, in both these examples, Moses and Jeremiah know God well enough, the relationship is intimate enough, for them to *still* speak with Him- and change His mind. Those who've prayed to God in cases of terminal illness [and countless other situations] will have sensed this 'battle', this 'struggle' almost, between God and His friends, His covenant people, and the element of 'persuasion' which there is going on *both* ways in the dialogue between God and ourselves. The simple fact that God really can change- there are over 40 references to His 'repentance' in Scripture- is vital to understand- for this is the basis of the prayer that changes things, that as it were wrestles with God.

And all this opens another window on the self-questioning which is associated with God- e.g. "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?" (Hos. 6:4; Hos. 11:8); or "How can I pardon you? Shall I not punish them for these things?" (Jer. 5:7,9,29; Jer. 9:7,9). Viewed from the understanding I've been exploring, such passages cease to be purely rhetorical questions- they come to reflect the actual and real self-questioning of Almighty God, reflective as it is of the turbulence of emotion which is part and parcel of being in a relationship which has gone painfully wrong. There even seems at times a difficulty on God's part to understand why the people He had loved could hate Him so much: "Have I been a wilderness to Israel, or a land of thick darkness? Why then do my people say, We will no more come to thee?" (Jer. 2:31); "Why then has this people turned away?" (Jer. 8:5); "Why have they provoked me to anger?" (Jer. 8:19; Jer. 2:14; Jer. 30:6; Is. 5:4; Is. 50:2). "What more could I have done for my vineyard... why did it yield wild grapes?" (Is. 5:1-7). This is so much the anguished cry of bewildered middle age parents as they reflect upon a wayward child. This Divine struggle to understand reflects the extraordinary depth of His love for them; and it warns us in chilling terms as to the pain we can cause God if we spurn His amazing love. Jer. 8:4-7 records God reflecting that even the stork 'returns' predictably; but His people have inexplicably not returned to Him. This reveals a powerful thing- that our rejection of God's love is inexplicable even to God Himself. And yet mankind persists in this utter madness. For all our education, business sense, scientific knowledge- we are revealed as inexplicably foolish in rejecting God's love and not 'returning' [repenting] to Him.

Equipped with this understanding, a new window opens upon the "Woe...!" passages in the prophets. The Hebrew word doesn't really imply 'Woe to you, you'd better watch out for what's coming on you!'; rather is it an expression used to express the pain of the speaker over a broken relationship, e.g. at a funeral. And yet the pain of God leads Him to hope, even desperate hope; and again that hope is expressed and felt in terms which are relative to our kind of time. Hence His many questions relating to 'How long?': "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe me?" (Num. 14:11,27); "How long will it be till they are pure?" (Hos. 8:5; Jer. 4:14; 13:27). These aren't merely rhetorical questions. There's an element of literality about God's question- He doesn't know how long it will be, He can only imagine and hope- for Israel has free will, and will not turn to Him just when He says so. For He is in covenant relationship with them, He loves them, and as we've emphasized, that must involve each party allowing the other to function independently and to have their own time and free choice for returning. These questions, and other similar statements from God, are almost God's probing of possible paths into the future- the future which He could, of course, choose to know, but it seems He chooses not to fully know.

All the above indicates that God has allowed Himself to be made vulnerable. Lev. 5:15,16 records: "If a soul commit a trespass, and sin through ignorance in the holy things of the Lord... he shall make amends for the harm that he has done in the holy things". I find this wonderful; a sin of ignorance, an unintentional mishandling of Divine things, causes "harm"- to the sensitive soul of God Himself. A French proverb says that to understand all (as God does) is to forgive all; but it also means to be hurt by all so much the more. Just as little children assume their parents are insensitive and mere rocks of strength and provision, so we can fail to appreciate our Heavenly Father's sensitivity. Love, promises, covenant relationship, feeling for others, revealing yourself to the object of your love- this is all part of what it means for this sensitive God to enter covenant relationship with us. The vulnerability and sensitivity of God is reflected in the way that He is concerned that His covenant people, His wife, who bears His Name, might profane His Name (Lev. 19:12; Ex. 20:7; Dt. 5:11). His repeated concern that His Name be taken in vain doesn't simply refer to the casual use of the word "God" as an expression of exasperation. God is concerned about His people taking His Name upon themselves (Num. 6:27) in vain- i.e., marrying Him, entering covenant relationship with Him, taking on His Name- but not being serious about that relationship, taking it on as a vain thing, like a woman who casually marries a man who loves her at the very core of his being, when for her, it's just a casual thing and she lives a profligate and adulterous life as his wife. When God revealed His Name to His people, opening up the very essence of His character to them, He was making Himself vulnerable. We reveal ourselves intimately to another because we wish for them to make a response to us, to love us for what we revealed to them. God revealed Himself to Israel, He sought for intimacy in the covenant relationship, and therefore was and is all the more hurt when His people turn away from Him, after having revealed to them all the wonders of His word (Hos. 8:12). God revealed Himself to Israel alone, in all the detail of His law and prophets (Am. 3:2). And they didn't want Him. Hence His very deep hurt; and also, His excited joy that we grasp that same word with eager minds and seek to love, understand and serve Him faithfully to the end. Given the rejection experienced by God, and the genuine and very real nature of His emotional response to it, it's natural that He would earnestly seek another relationship- and this is just the huge emotional energy He puts into searching for His new bride. He so wants intimacy, a relationship of meaning and mutuality. In our efforts to help each other perceive that, in our sharing of His word with the world and with other believers, in our efforts to help people get baptized into covenant with Him... we are working in step with His earnest desire for relationship with people. And He will bless our efforts. And as we seek to root out of our lives and characters

those things which come between us and Him, we likewise will enjoy His very special and joyful blessing and empowerment.

This understanding of God assists us in comprehending how on one hand, the Lord Jesus knew from the beginning who should betray Him; and yet He went through the pain, shock and surprise of realizing that Judas, his own familiar friend in whom He trusted, had done this to Him (Ps. 41:9; Jn. 6:64; 13:11). He knew, and yet He chose to limit that foreknowledge from love. This is in fact what all human beings are capable of, seeing we are made in the image of God. Thus Samson surely knew Delilah would betray him, and yet his love for her made him trust her. And we as observers see women marrying alcoholic men, wincing as we do at the way their love makes them limit their foreknowledge. There is an element of this in God, as there was in His Son as He faced the cross. Thus we read of the Lord Jesus being silent before His slaughterers, being led out to death as a sheep (Is. 53:7). But this idiom is used about Jeremiah to describe his wilful naivety about Israel's desire to slay him: "I was like a lamb or an ox that is brought to the slaughter; and I knew not that they had devised devices against me" (Jer. 11:19). In this Jeremiah was indeed a type of Christ.

The Pain Of God In The Cross

The things we have discussed above lead us ultimately towards another window onto the sufferings of God in the death of His beloved Son. God speaks of being burdened by Israel's sins (Is. 43:24)- and yet this is a prelude to the passages which speak of the Lord Jesus bearing our sins on the cross (Is. 53:4,11,12). We even read of God being wearied by Israel's sins (Is. 7:13; Jer. 15:6; Ez. 24:12; Mal. 2:17). Even though God does not "grow weary" (Is. 40:28) by nature, it seems to me that in His full entering into His people's situation, He does allow Himself to grow weary with the sins of those with whom He is in covenant relationship. It was this kind of capacity which God has which was supremely revealed in His 'sharing in' the crucifixion of His Son. God's long term 'holding His peace' at Israel's sins resulted in a build up of internal forces within God: "For a long time have I held my peace... restrained myself, now will I cry out like a woman in travail, I will gasp and pant" (Is. 42:14; 63:15; 64:12). God crying out, gasping, panting... leads straight on, in the context, to the suffering servant. This is the same idea as God's heart growing warm and being kindled in internal struggle about His people in Hos. 11:8,9. And all this went on supremely at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus. I have [elsewhere](#) commented upon the very intense connection between Father and Son at that time. Crucifixion meant humiliation. God's experience with Israel had led to His humiliation before the nations. For example, seeing the ark represented the very presence of God, the capture of the ark was in a sense the capture of God (1 Sam. 5:7,11 cp. 4:7). Ps. 78:61 comments: "He delivered his power to captivity, his glory to the hand of the foe"

In the death of Jesus we see the Son whom God had so dearly hoped His people would reverence- but they rejected Him. As something of each of us dies in the death of those we love, so "God was in Christ", sharing in His sufferings and death. It was not of course that God died. But He fully shared in the sufferings of His Son unto death. There is in the Hebrew text of Jud. 10:16 something which defies translation. We read there that God was so hurt by Israel's sufferings that in sympathy with them, "His *nephesh* ["soul"] was shortened" or expended. The phrase is used in Num. 21:4 and Jud. 16:16 about death or the diminishment of life. God's pain was such that this was how He felt, because He so internalized the sufferings of His people. And how much more in the death of His Son? He even feels like that for the sufferings of Gentiles- in the same way as Moab would weep for their slain sons,

so God says that *His* heart would cry out for Moab, "therefore I weep [along] with the weeping of Jazer... my soul moans like a lyre for Moab" (Is. 15:5; Is. 16:9,11). God "pitied" Nineveh- a Hebrew word meaning to pity with tears (Jonah 4:11). The mourning of the prophets over Tyre (Ez. 27:1) and Babylon (Is. 21:3,4) was an embodiment of God's grief even over those not in covenant with Him. And how much more does He weep and suffer with His people Israel in their sufferings (Jer. 12:12; 23:10; Hos. 4:2,3); "my heart yearns / moans for him" (Jer. 31:20). Note in the context of Jer. 31:20 how Rachel is weeping for her children and would not be comforted, and then God as it were takes up that weeping for the same children (Jer. 31:15,20). God mourns over the fact that He can see in the future how His people will be mourning their children in the streets (Am. 5:17,18). In all this we see that God is not only a judge, but a judge who suffers with those to whom He gives punishment. And yet how much more did He weep for His beloved Son, suffering as He did *not* because He had sinned. And He weeps for us too in our weeping. There are tears and the yearnings of God in Heaven. We are told to weep with those that weep- and this is a reflection of how God weeps for and with us.

The Urgent Desire Of God For Us

The urgent desire of the Father and Son for us, for our spiritual growth, is so great that it involves them in an element of dynamism in their relationship with us. They're not merely passively awaiting our efforts to please them, grow in appreciation of them, and adopting their spirit as ours. As in any truly legitimate, inter-personal relationship, there's an element of dynamism; nothing can remain still, expectations and hopes rise, are dashed, delayed or realized, with all the emotions that are involved.

The Lord Jesus won't turn over a different face tomorrow when judgment day comes. He's the same yesterday as today as for ever. The spirit He showed in His ministry and which He reveals today, will be the same He operates by at the judgment encounter. The eagerness of the Lord to accept us, to find in us spiritual fruit, is perhaps reflected in the way that He begins inviting people of 'His' level to the feast of the Kingdom, but ends up lowering the bar as time goes on, to try by all means to get at least somebody in there (Lk. 14:21-23). This theme of lowering the bar is perhaps continued in that same passage by the way the Lord says that His disciples must forsake / 'bid goodbye to' all that they had (Lk. 14:33). This is the same word found earlier in Lk. 9:61, where some time before, a potential disciple who first wished to go and "bid goodbye to" his family was judged as not suitably committed to the urgency of the task. But now, the Lord says that this is acceptable in His definition of discipleship. This Lord is our Lord.

Think of how *eager* the Father and Son have been to find spiritual fruit in us. Through the centuries of His involvement with Israel, God had expected to find the fruit of justice in the vineyard of Israel- but He found only poison berries (Is. 5:4), instead of justice He found abuse and oppression of others (Is. 5:7). And all that despite doing absolutely all He could for that vineyard. But according to Mt. 21:34-38, this didn't stop Him from having a hopeful, fruit-seeking attitude. He sent His servants the prophets to find the fruit- but they were beaten and murdered. He finally sent His Son, reasoning that "*surely* they will reverence my son" (Mt. 21:37; Mk. 12:6- here we have a unique insight into God's internal thought process). But they murdered Him. I have suggested elsewhere that this language can only suggest that God in some sense limited His omniscience and omnipotence in order to fully enter into our dimensions; and hence His experience of dashed hope and deep disappointment. Amazing as the Father's hopefulness was, His Son's was even greater. This Father who had had all this

experience of simply not getting any fruit, asked His vinedresser (the Lord Jesus) to cut down the tree of Israel, as for the three years of Christ's ministry He had sought fruit from them and not found any; and further, this tree was 'cumbering the ground', taking away nutrients which He could have given to another (Gentile) tree. But His servant argues back with Him; the servant asks to be allowed to dig and dung around the tree; and then, he says, '*You* can cut it down, although you asked *me* to do this job'. This was quite unusual for a servant to talk like this; but it's an insight into the way the Lord Jesus was even more hopeful than His longsuffering Father. The Lord was prepared to dig around the tree- and digging was the lowest, most shameful occupation (Lk. 16:3). Further, He would shovel dung, making Him unclean and despised of men. He *so* wanted fruit on Israel. This describes the intense effort of the Lord Jesus during the last six months of His ministry. His attitude was summarized when shortly before He died, He came hungry to a fig tree, expecting to find just the immature beginnings of fruit there, which He would gladly have eaten. But that particular tree had nothing on it. His deep hunger and willingness to eat anything reflected His willingness to find some spirituality from Israel. But He "found none", just as there was "not found" any of those Jews He healed who would glorify God (Lk. 17:18 s.w. Lk. 13:6). This longsuffering, patient, passionate desire for spiritual fruit in the Lord Jesus is presented as being even stronger than it was in His Father. No wonder John the Baptist misunderstood the extent of Christ's grace- he proclaimed that Jesus already had the axe aimed at the bottom of the trees (Mt. 3:10; Lk. 3:9), and was about to fell them. The situation truly demanded this- but actually the Lord Jesus waited three years for fruit, and when it didn't come, even then He pleaded with the Father not to fell the tree but let Him dig and dung it... We must factor all this into our understanding of Mt. 7:19, where the Lord apparently in a bland, matter-of-fact manner teaches that the tree that doesn't bear good fruit will be hewn down and burnt. This burning is ultimately at the judgment day; but all our lives He is earnestly seeking to develop spiritual fruit upon us; as in the parable of the sower, only those who produce totally nothing will be rejected. Of course our fruit must be the fruit that abides- the changes in personality which are permanent, the converts who remain, the forgiveness which is maintained on a felt level, the generosity never later regretted... But if there's even something of this, then it seems this is what the Lord is so eagerly seeking. Earlier, Israel were the vine and the Lord Jesus the vinedresser (Lk. 13:7). But now *we* are the vine, and God Himself the vinedresser (Jn. 15:1). We are in good hands; and the Father and Son who through Biblical history showed themselves so sensitive to spiritual fruit are the very same ones who will meet us in the last day.

God's Forgiveness

God is outstanding in His forgiveness of us. But what *is* forgiveness? It worries me that so many of us actually haven't thought through basic questions like this. It seems to me that forgiveness is far more than a vague decision in the mind; I like the definition of forgiveness which my wife thought up, and which I jotted down as profound: "A valuing of the relationship more than and above the hurt caused by the sin". It is on the basis of His *relationship* with us, and His valuing of that relationship so highly, as a covenant relationship, which empowers God to forgive us so wonderfully. And the same should hold true for us in our forgiveness of others in covenant relationship with us.

Reflection upon the nature of God's covenant relationship reveals His grace. There are no lack of Bible passages which speak of His love and blessing in the covenant as being conditional- *if* the people were obedient, then God would keep His covenant "and he will love thee and bless thee and multiply thee" (Dt. 7:13). Yet the record of the history of Israel shows

that Israel were not obedient; and yet God still kept His covenant, loved them and multiplied them. It's rather like a parent setting conditions for a child, and yet not abiding by the deal, so great is the love felt for the child. God's covenant is in a sense conditional; and yet in another sense it isn't, because His love has the characteristic of unconditionality about it, simply because we are His children. The whole history of Israel is encouragement in this.

Notes

(1) E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* [The Anchor Bible] (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 171.

(2) David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1992).

(3) E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* [The Anchor Bible] (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 112.

2.13.1 The Promises in Eden have practical implications; or, The Woman Of Tekoah

The essential conflict between the righteous and the world as prophesied in Gen. 3:15 is brought out throughout Scripture- e.g.. "an unjust man is an abomination to the righteous; and he that is upright in the way [i.e. righteous] is an abomination to the wicked" (Prov. 29:27 RV). That conflict is articulated moment by moment in our internal struggles, as well as in our relationships in this world. The events of Eden have practical significance insofar as they provide an explanation of where we as individuals are coming from, both physically and morally. Only Biblical Christianity can give any firm answer as to the question of origins. Adam's fall beneath the power of temptation is of course our pattern. The lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life were the quintessence of the temptation in Eden, just as it is in our hearts and lives to this day. It was the desire for knowledge which was Eve's downfall; and the essence of this is found in our tacit, unspoken desire to be justified by knowledge today. There is the feeling that because we 'know the truth', because we have what we consider to be the true interpretations of the book called the Bible, therefore and thereby we are justified with God, we are somehow walking with the Lord. But knowledge alone cannot justify.

The wise woman of Tekoah understood the implications of the promise in Eden when she tells David that "neither doth God respect any person: yet doth he devise means, that his banished be not expelled from him" (2 Sam. 14:14). Whom did God banish? Adam, and all his children. But God 'devised means' through the promises of Gen. 3:15 so that this banishment was not permanent expulsion. The means devised was the death and resurrection of His Son, the seed of the woman. But the woman's point was that therefore, David ought to restore his sinful son, whom he had banished- for "the king doth not fetch home again his banished" (2 Sam. 14:13). Her point was that as God sought to restore His banished sons, through the pain and cost to Him of the blood of His Son, so we ought to likewise be inspired to win back the banished. And so we look to those banished from ecclesial life by disfellowship, church politics, personal animosities of past decades, or simply their own outright sins; or those marginalized by poverty, education, disability, health, geography...these are the banished whom we ought to be winning back. And the force majeure in all this arises from the implications of those promises in Eden. Truly the woman of Tekoah was, as she is described, a "wise woman".

2.14 Baptism Is Essential To Salvation

One of the reasons for baptism is perhaps so that we realize that we can't just drift into relationship with God; there must be a concrete point at which we decide for Him and His Son. The whole thing is so counter-instinctive, as Naaman discovered- to get wet, with all the awkwardness of it being so public, to be exposed and vulnerable to the view of others, to be dipped under water by another person... it's not exactly painless and effortless. Commonly enough, the New Testament speaks of baptism as a calling upon the Name of the Lord. This must be understood against its Hebrew background- *qara' beshem Yahweh*, which originally referred to approaching God in sacrifice (Gen. 12:7,8; Ps. 116:4,17). God placed His Name upon places in order to make them suitable places for sacrifice to be offered to Him (Dt. 12:4-7,21; Jer. 7:12). Baptism was thus seen as a sacrificial commitment to Yahweh in solemn covenant.

Further, in the first century, such baptisms were required of Gentiles who wished to become proselyte Jews and thus enter "Israel". For orthodox Jews to submit to baptism demanded a lot- for it implied they were not by birth part of the true Israel as they had once proudly thought. The Jews thought of Israel in the very terms which Paul applies to Jesus: "We Thy people whom Thou hast honoured and hast called the Firstborn and Only-Begotten, Near and Beloved One" (1). The New Testament uses these titles to describe the Lord Jesus Christ- and we must be baptized into Him in order to be in His Name and titles. The Lord Jesus was thus portrayed as Israel idealized and personified, all that Israel the suffering servant should have been; thus only by baptism into Christ of Jew and Gentile could they become part of the true seed of Abraham, the Israel of God (Gal. 3:27-29). The act of baptism into Christ is no less radical for us in our contexts today than it was for first century Jews. All we once mentally held dear, we have to give up.

Our Relationship With God

Being baptized into the Name has quite some implications. In Hebrew thought, you called your name upon that which was your personal property- hence a wife took on the name of her husband because he placed it upon her. By baptism into the Name of the Father and His Son, we become their personal property, their woman, upon whom they have unique claims and obligations. Baptism in this sense is a kind of marriage contract with none less than the God of the universe. We can't drift into relationship with God; God has designed the whole experience of baptism so that we once and for all make a choice, to be with Him and not this world, to be in Christ and covered in Him, rather than wandering in the rags of our own righteousness and occasional half-hearted stabs at real spirituality.

Motivation To Powerful Preaching

There is no doubt that the cross and baptism into that death was central to the preaching message of the early brethren. According to the Bible, baptism is essential to salvation; yet we can't draw hoops around God and limit His salvation ultimately. The completeness and reality of the redemption achieved is expressed in Hebrews with a sense of finality, and we ought to not let that slip from our presentation of the Gospel either. There in the cross, the justice and mercy of God are brought together in the ultimate way. There in the cross is the appeal. Some of the early missionaries reported how they could never get any response to their message until they explained the cross; and so, with our true doctrinal understanding of it, it is my belief that the cross is what has the power of conversion. A man cannot face it and

not have a deep impression of the absoluteness of the issues involved in faith and unbelief, in choosing to accept or reject the work of the struggling, sweating, gasping Man who hung on the stake. It truly is a question of believe or perish. Baptism into that death and resurrection is essential for salvation. Of course we must not bully or intimidate people into faith, but on the other hand, a preaching of the cross cannot help but have something compulsive and urgent and passionate about it. For we appeal to men on God's behalf to accept the work of the cross as efficacious for them. In this sense baptism is essential to salvation *from our perspective*. It can be that much of our preaching somehow fails in urgency and entreaty. We seem to be in places too expository, or too attractive with the peripherals, seeking to please men...or be offering good advice, very good advice indeed, background Bible knowledge, how to read the Bible effectively....all of which may be all well and good, but we should be preaching good news, not good advice. The message of the cross is of a grace and real salvation which is almost too good to believe. It isn't Bible background or archaeology or Russia invading Israel. It is the Man who had our nature hanging there perfect, full of love, a light in this dark world...and as far as we perceive the wonder of it all, as far as this breaks in upon us, so far we will hold it forth to this world. If we think there could be other paths to salvation, then we wouldn't preach Christ as we do. The zeal of the early brethren to witness for Him was because, as they explained, there is no other name under Heaven whereby we may be saved. People do not drift into covenant relationship with God; they have to consciously chose, and God has instituted baptism as a means to that end; to force a man or woman to a conscious decision and crossing of boundaries. And this is why we preach towards baptism, with an eye on future conversion, knowing that baptism is essential to salvation.

Lk. 3:12 records how there "came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do?" . There is a parallel between desiring baptism and realizing that they must *do* something concretely in their lives. The baptism process brings us into the realm of God's gracious forgiveness and redemption, and into living contact with the real Christ. There is no way we can be passive to this and do nothing about it.

Motivation Not To Sin

Paul didn't just decide to write about baptism in Romans 6; the classic exposition of baptism which we find there is within a context. And it's not an appeal for people to be baptized- it's written to baptized believers, appealing for them to live out in practice the "in Christ" status which they had been given as a result of their baptisms. If we really feel the result of our baptism, we will not "continue in sin". Martin Luther used to overcome temptation by taking a chalk and writing *baptizatus sum*- 'I am baptized' (2). And therefore we simply cannot continue in servitude to sin. As Karl Barth put it in his needle-sharp analysis of baptism's implications: "Baptism recalls me to the service of witness, since it recalls me to daily repentance" (3).

Notes

(1) *The Apocalypse Of Ezra* 6.55-58 (London: S.P.C.K., 1917 ed.) p. 47.

(2) As quoted in Karl Barth, *Dogmatics In Outline* (London: S.C.M., 1972 ed.) p. 150. N.T. Wright claims that Luther used to shout out these words - *Paul For Everyone: Romans Chapters 1-8* (London: S.P.C.K., 2004) p. 109.

(3) Barth, *op. cit.* p. 151.

2.15 Baptism is vital for salvation. Through it we enter covenant relationship with God. By baptism we enter the body of Christ, becoming one with Him.

Don't Continue In Sin

Baptism is a change of masters- but we are still bondslaves, not of sin, but of God. The implications of this figure may not be immediately apparent to the modern mind. We are totally committed to the Master- this is who we are, bondslaves. In Gen. 44:9, being dead is paralleled with being a slave; and there appears a parallel between being a bonds slave and dying in Gen. 44:9,17. Indeed, Romans 6 draws the same parallel- death to sin is part of being a slave of Christ. The very fact we are baptized means we should not continue in sin, seeing we are dead to it (Rom. 6:2). This is one of the most basic implications of a first principle which we live in ignorance of most of our days. Israel coming out of Egypt through the Red Sea is a type of our baptism (1 Cor. 10:1). So therefore we'll preach the Gospel and try with all our heart to persuade others (including our children) to be baptized. We will realize that the unbaptized world has no hope, and we will treat them accordingly. Baptism can never be undone; as a result of that covenant statement before God, we for evermore live our lives with a sense of responsibility to Him. " If ye call [upon yourselves] on the [name of] the Father [an allusion to baptism into the Father's Name]...pass the time of your sojourning here in fear: *forasmuch* as ye know [i.e. the more you realize this, the more you will live in fear / reverence] that ye...were redeemed...with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:17-19). It should be noted that allusions to baptism in Paul's letters are in passages where Paul is trying to correct misunderstandings about unity and way of life (Rom. 6; 8:12-17; Gal. 3:27-4:6; 1 Cor. 1-4, 12). The early brethren had a tendency to forget the implications of baptism. And so it is with us all today. Entering the body of Christ by baptism means that our sins are in a sense against our own brethren, our spiritual body, as well as against the Lord personally. Like the prodigal, we realize we sin against Heaven and men.

Separation From The World

Deuteronomy speaks time and again of how Israel's Red Sea baptism [cp. ours] was to be the basis for their daily living; the fact they had been redeemed from the world by 'baptism' was to inspire them in every aspect of spiritual endeavour. Because they had been brought out of Egypt, *therefore* they were to keep the Sabbath, not worship idols, be obedient, witness to the surrounding nations, disfellowship false teachers who would take them back to Egypt, and especially, it was to motivate them to the faith that they could overcome all obstacles in their path to the promised land (Dt. 20:1). For those raised Christian, this sense of deliverance from the world and entering the body of Christ through baptism must be hard. But it is nonetheless true for you as it is for the hardest living worldling.

Strength Against Immorality

Therefore, Paul says, smashing through all Corinth's rationalizations of their sin, " know ye not" (isn't it obvious to you?) that we should not become one body with a prostitute (1 Cor. 6:15). This isn't just because *we* belong to the body of Christ and manifest Him; it is also because we are representative of us all who are in that body, and we wouldn't wish to bring His body, i.e. all the other believers, into such an inappropriate position. What you do, we all do. And the Lord Jesus has delegated His reputation in the eyes of this world to us, who are

His body to them. The wonder of being baptized into His Name, entering the body of Christ (1 Cor. 6:14 matches our resurrection with that of the Lord) means that like our early brethren, we will rejoice to suffer shame for the sake of carrying that Name (Mt. 10:24,25). It will be "enough" for us that we know something of our Lord's sufferings. The more we reflectively read the Gospels, the more we will know the nature and extent of His sufferings, and the more we will see in our own something of His.

Be Gracious

Paul reasons that we enter the body of Christ by baptism; and nobody hates their own body. He feeds and cares for it. This not only means that the Lord will likewise care for us. It means that we now have the basis of self-respect and a healthy love of self [the kind the Lord had in mind when He said we should love our neighbour *as* we love ourselves]. Because we are to count ourselves as the body of *Christ*, we no longer need wallow in the feeling that we are so unworthy, we aren't worth making the effort with. And therefore we should truly love our brother; Lev. 25:38 reasons that because of Israel's experience of the Red Sea redemption, therefore they were to have a generous spirit to their brother. Because the Egyptians were hard taskmasters, and Israel had been graciously saved from them, *therefore* they were not to be hard on each other (Lev. 25:40). If the oppressed [as Israel were oppressed] cry out unto you [as Israel cried out for their affliction], you must hear them, otherwise God will hear them and punish you, as if you are the Egyptian taskmaster (Ex. 22:24-27). Indeed, the whole Law of Moses is shot through with direct and indirect reference to the Red Sea experience. It was as if this was to be the motivator for their obedience and upholding of the culture of kindness which the Law sought to engender (Lev.23, 24; Dt. 17:7; 24:19-24). And our experience of redemption from this world ought to have the same effect.

Motivation To Be United

By being baptized into Christ, all that is true of Him becomes true of us. Entering the body of Christ carries this implication. We must aspire to be united, with neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female etc., because "ye are all one man in Christ" (Gal. 3:28 RV). We "are all sons of God" (3:26 RV) because of our baptism into the Son of God. And so Paul goes on to reason that just as Christ was "the heir" (cp. "this is the heir..."), who is "lord of all", "even so we..." were kept under the law for a time (Gal. 4:1-3). The basis of our unity is that there is only one Jesus, and by being in Him we are living lives committed to the imitation of that same man. It's painless enough to read Gal. 3:27-29- that all those baptized "in Christ" therefore are in a status where there is neither Jew nor Gentile, no human barriers between us. But this is actually something we have to live out in life in order for it to become reality. In the "new man" whom we have "put on", i.e. Christ, "there *cannot be* Greek and Jew" etc (Col. 3:11 RV). But we have to do something in order to bring this about- mere baptism isn't enough. Paul continues: "Put on *therefore*... a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience" (Col. 3:12). If we are "in Christ", there "cannot be" division in that body- if there is, from our perspective, then surely we are proclaiming ourselves to be not of that body. But in order to actualize being "in Christ", we have to *therefore* show kindness, humility, patience etc. *in order that* there will not be division. We have to live out in practice the status which we have been given at baptism, of being "in" the undivided, indivisible Christ.

2.16 Forgiveness of sins and salvation really has been received by us through repentance, through absolute grace. We have been saved, as Israel we have been constituted in embryo God's Kingdom, although this will only be physically manifested at the Lord's return.

The Responsibility Of Freedom

Gal. 3:15-20 stresses how the Law came after the promises to Abraham, and cannot disannul them. Reasoning back from Paul's writing, we can arrive at some understanding of what the Judaists were saying. Their position was that baptism of Gentiles into the Abrahamic covenant was fine, but they must keep the Law for salvation. Paul is pointing out that the promises to Abraham offer eternal inheritance in the Kingdom on the basis of faith and grace, and neither the Law of Moses nor any other form of legalism can change that fundamental basis. An appreciation of the promises will therefore root us in the wonder of salvation by grace, to the point that we will reject all forms of legalism whenever they are proposed in the ecclesia, and whenever our own flesh seeks to justify itself by works achieved rather than by humbly accepting forgiveness of sins. That the Lord's death took away the Law can be assented to us and passed by. But the RV of Romans draws a difference between " *the law*" and " *law*" without the article, i.e. legality. Because we are saved by grace, no legal code, of Moses or anyone else, can save us. Therefore we are free- but that freedom is so wonderful that we are under " *the law of Christ*" , the rigid principle of always seeking to act as this Man would do, who freed us from law. Otherwise, we end up replacing one form of legalism [under Moses] with another, a set of laws given by Jesus. He *has* saved us in prospect, outside of any law. And we are to rejoice in this and yet respond to it.

Dostoevsky's epic *The Brothers Karamazov* is really a parable of the terrible burden of this freedom and the forgiveness of sins. In it, Jesus returns to earth. He is arrested, and the Inquisitor visits Him in the middle of the night. He tries to explain to Jesus that people do not want freedom. They want security. He argues with Jesus, that if one really loves people, then you make them happy- but not free. Freedom is dangerous. People want law, not responsibility; they want the neurotic comfort of rules, not the danger of decision making and the burdens it brings. Christ, says the Inquisitor, must not start up this business about freedom and grace and the commitment and responsibility it demands. Let things be; let the church have its laws. And will Jesus please go away. The life of grace to the extent that it must be lived is a radical confrontation- it creates the necessity of making pure freewill decisions to do and think acts of grace in response to God's grace. Grace has been presented as the easy way out. It isn't. It is far, far more demanding than legalism.

Unfeigned Love

The experience of that grace which brought about the forgiveness of our sins will make us gentle people, kind hearted, generous, not hard-minded in our judgment of situations; it will make us dedicate ourselves to the work of sharing this superb grace with others through preaching, and will inspire us to work unceasingly to reclaim those who have wandered away from the grace of God, and to build up those who hesitate to fully accept it. As God has reached out into our little world, so we will try to do in the lives of those around us. The end result of obeying the truth is " *unfeigned love of the brethren...love (of) one another with a pure heart fervently*" (1 Pet. 1:22). " *Ye were running well; who did hinder you, that ye should not [keep on] obey the truth?*" (Gal. 5:7) suggests that obeying the Truth is not just in baptism; it is an ongoing motivation to keep running the race of practical life in Christ. We " *love one another from the heart fervently: having been begotten again...*" (1 Pet. 1:23). Love

of the brotherhood is in the end the result and guarantee of the new birth. We are asked not to receive God's grace in vain, nor do despite unto the spirit [power] of grace. These phrases surely suggest that the experience of grace is a compulsion to action, which we can resist but ought rather to allow to work in us to bring forth fruit. The [Gospel of the] Kingdom of God and our relation to it now ought to bring forth fruit in us (Mt. 21:43). It isn't just a set of true propositions.

Confidence And Desire For Christ's Return

Grace and faith in the forgiveness of sins teaches us to look for the blessed hope and the appearing of Jesus (Tit. 2:9-11). If we aren't sure of salvation at His return, we can hardly look forward to it. A firm grasp of salvation- definite salvation- by a real grace alone means we can look to that day with confidence and expectation. And it's an upward spiral. We have " love toward all the saints, because of the hope which *is* laid up for you" (Col. 1:5 RV). If we doubt the hope, thinking we don't know if we will be accepted or not...there isn't much inspiration to love our brethren with the similar senseless grace which *we* have experienced.

Generosity And Unity

Because in the Kingdom we will be given all the wealth that is Christ's, therefore we should sell what we now have and give to the poor (Lk. 12:33 cp. 44 NIV). But more than this, in a sense God *has now* given us the Kingdom (Lk. 12:32 NIV), and therefore we should in natural response to this give of our blessings (in whatever form) to make the poor rich, just as Christ did to us (2 Cor. 8:9 alludes here). Basically, according to this, generosity (both of spirit and material giving) is proportionate to our faith that we both have now and will receive the matchless riches of God's grace in Christ. " Grace" is used by Paul in 2 Cor. to refer to both the grace God has given us and the grace of giving which the Corinthians ought to respond to it with; as God had reached into their lives, so they should reach into the lives of their poverty stricken brethren. The good news of God's Kingdom, in both it's present and future aspects, is like yeast which works away *from the inside* of a man and *inevitably, by its very nature* makes a fundamental change (Lk. 13:20,21). Because whoever really believes the doctrines of the One Faith and lives the life which they naturally bring forth, really will be saved. Therefore we will have a sense of true unity with our brethren who believe as we do, whatever human barriers there may be between us. Therefore " the Faith" is linked with unity between believers (Eph. 4:13; Phil. 1:27). We will live eternally together, and this must begin in life together now. It is inevitable that a certain amount of 'politics' intrude upon our ecclesial experience; one group wants this, another wants that; one sees things one way, another perceives things from a different viewpoint. But here again, the principles of the most basic Gospel must govern us. The Greek word for 'politics' does in fact occur in the New Testament.- when Paul says that our *politeuesthe* must be " worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27). The principles of the loving, saving, reconciling, patient Christ must work their way through even the politics that are inevitably part of life together.

Fearing God

Job 37:23,24 reasons that we *therefore* fear God because God is plenteous in grace and will surely save us and give us forgiveness of sins. This is the very opposite of what is often supposed- that appreciating salvation by grace may lead us to not fear God as we should. But " men do therefore fear him" if they truly grasp the awesome extent of His grace.

Being Truthful

God lamented of Israel: "Though I have redeemed them, yet they have spoken lies" (Hos. 7:13). The redemption that we have received is real, actual and true. We really will live eternally in God's Kingdom; we will be there. The truth, the utter reality of the redemption we have known, ought to result in our being truthful in our words. To lie is a reflection of how the true reality, that we are redeemed, has not yet sunk deeply into us.

The Works Of Repentance

Mt. 21:29,32 parallel 'repent and work' with 'repent and believe'. As the Lord said in Jn. 6, the work of God is to believe- in the forgiveness of sins. The experience of repentance and forgiveness will result in an ever deeper faith, and the works of gratitude which are inseparable part of faith. The parable speaks of repenting and going to work in the Father's vineyard; as if care for our brethren, seeking their fruitfulness and that of this world [after the pattern of the vineyard of Isaiah 5] is the obvious work of repentance.

2.17 There is one body of Christ (this is a first principle of the Faith, according to the NT- although not given the prominence it should be amongst us).

Unity

We enter the one body of Christ by baptism into the one body of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 12:13). We therefore have a duty to fellowship all who remain in the body (1 Cor. 10:16). Paul describes Peter as not walking according to the truth of the Gospel (Gal. 2:14) by effectively saying there were two bodies, of Jews and Gentiles, and only fellowshiping one of these groups rather than the entire one body. Paul put all the ecclesial politics behind him and withstood Peter "to his face". If we know "the truth" of Christ's Gospel, we will fellowship all those in Him and in that Truth. If we don't, Paul foresaw that ultimately "the truth of the Gospel" would be lost (Gal. 2:5). Tragically, in man-made attempts to preserve the Gospel's Truth the rest of the body has often been disfellowshipped. But by fellowshiping all the body, the "Truth" is kept!

Being Truthful

Eph. 4:25 draws another practical conclusion from the one body of Christ: "Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: *for* we are members one of another". If we are one body, there should *therefore* be truthfulness between us. No white lying, no gross exaggeration, no gossiping, no presentation of facts in a distorted way. Why? Because "we are members one of another". If we *do* behave like this, we are really saying that we are not members of the one body. The one body is Jesus; and all that is true of Him must be true of us. He is not divided, and neither should we be, either within our own beings, or as a community. "Be perfectly joined together" (1 Cor. 1:10) uses the same Greek word as in Heb. 10:5, where we read of the Lord's one body "prepared", joined together. And earlier, in Eph. 4:14,15, the point has been made that because we are not blown around with every wind of doctrine, therefore we deal truly in love (RVmg.). Truthfulness with each other within the one body of Christ is related to our having known and deeply believed the truth of God. The implication is also that by speaking and preaching truth, we "grow up into him in

all things, which is the head, even Christ" , who is " the Truth" in every way. Notice how Eph. 4 stresses the need for true doctrine because this is related to truthfulness with each other; if we are not tossed to and fro by false doctrines, then we will speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:14,15); "If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus...wherefore [because of this] put away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour" in the one body of Christ (Eph. 4:21,25).

2.18 Death is total unconsciousness; hell is the grave; " like sheep they are laid in the grave" , all those with whom we mix. " And the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning" . There is no immortal soul; the Hebrew word nephesh or 'soul' refers to the life / person.

The neo-Platonists showed the moral danger of believing in an immortal soul. They reasoned that since body and soul are totally different from each other, therefore immoral conduct by the body doesn't affect the inner man. Yet once we realize that the same Hebrew word *nephesh* is translated both 'soul' and 'body', it becomes apparent that the actions of our body cannot be separated from our 'soul' or essential being. The Bible faces us up to the death issue. To consider the reality of one's own death, and that death is truly total unconsciousness, marvelously focuses the mind. It cuts through the chatter and noise and distraction of our mind, refocusing us upon the things that ultimately matter. Many religions, wrong and confused as they may be on many other issues, have correctly discerned that contemplation of one's own death is a vital part on personal transformation. What would happen if you were to die today...? What would your gravestone look like... These are the sorts of questions we can profitably meditate upon, once we grasp true Bible teaching about the death state and the hope of resurrection.

Responsibility

As in our own day, literature and thought of Bible times tried to minimize death. Yet in both Old and New Testaments, death is faced for what it is. Job 18:14 calls it "the king of terrors"; Paul speaks of death as the last and greatest enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). Humanity lives all their lives "in fear of death" (Heb. 2:17). Facing death for what it is imparts a seriousness and intensity to human life and endeavour, keeps our sense of responsibility to God paramount, and the correct functioning of conscience all important. We see this in people facing death; but those who've grasped Bible truth about death ought to live like this all the time, rejoicing too that we have been delivered from it. Because we do not have an immortal soul that is somehow recycled into us through reincarnation, our soul / life is given to us by God. In the parable of the rich fool, the Lord says that in the day of his death, his soul was "required" of him (Lk. 12:20). The Greek word for 'required' means 'to ask back, to request to be given again'. The fact we have life [a 'soul'] makes us responsible to God; and at the judgment we will be asked to give that life back to Him with an account. And, as the parable shows, this utterly precludes a focus upon material acquisition. The Lord goes on to say that therefore we should take no anxious thought about what our soul will eat or wear- because our soul / life is in fact God's soul / life, and He will care for it until He takes it back to Himself (Lk. 12:22). The soul is greater than food and clothes (Lk. 12:23 Gk.). The wonder that we are alive, with God's life in us, should be far greater to us than what we feed or clothe it with. Because we can't take that life out of ourselves until God does, nor can we give it to another person, nor can we make our body / soul grow taller, *therefore* we should not take anxious thought for the material things related to it, which are all peripheral compared to the wonder of the fact that we have life from God: "why take ye thought for the rest [Gk. 'the things that are left over /

extraneous']?" (Lk. 12:26). And to drive the point home, we are bidden "consider" (s.w. 'discover') the birds and plants, who are simply content with the life God has given them. This was the Lord's way of doing what Solomon did in Ecc. 3:17-20- showing that man and plants and animals are all possessed of the same God-given spirit / life. As Gen. 2:7; Ecc. 12:7 make clear, the spirit / life is given by God to our bodies; it doesn't come from anywhere else. There is no reincarnation. And this is no painless Bible fact; it demands that we live lives that are *His*, and not lived out as if our spirit / life / soul is *ours*. The fact that God "holdeth our soul in life", a reference to Gen. 2:7, means that David wanted to "make the voice of his praise to be heard" (Ps. 66:8,9). This was the meaning of the basic facts of creation for David!

Preservation Of Others

The fact God has given us life and preserves our soul (the Hebrew word *nephesh*) means that we likewise should seek to save and preserve the life of others, through our preaching and spiritual care of them: "If thou forbear to deliver them that are drawn unto death, and those that are ready to be slain; if thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? *and he that keepeth thy soul*, doth not he know it? and shall not he render to every man according to his works?" (Prov. 24:11,12). The emphasis is surely upon God keeping *our* soul meaning that we must keep the soul of others. Paul Tournier has argued that the [false] doctrine of an immortal soul has resulted in a devaluing of the human person: "Almost all of our contemporaries have a view of man which is far more Platonic than Christian, a view that sets a naturally immortal soul over against a body which has been reduced to the role of a transitory, noxious, contemptible garment"⁽¹⁾. The Christian salvation is "the salvation of the body"; our real, present person and body really matters; who we are and how we live, using the talents of our health and bodies, is of crucial importance. Sickness and death become positive, rather than negative, for the true believer. For they are all in the context of God's hand in our hands.

Preaching

There was once a master butcher, working in Harrod's- one of the most prestigious butcheries in central London. He was an earnest Christian, and over the counter there was a simple hand-written notice: " Like sheep they are laid in the grave" . And many noticed that, and over the years, came to accept the Faith. Realizing the tragic brevity and ultimate vanity of the human experience " under the sun" will motivate us to bring this to the attention of the perishing millions with whom we rub shoulders daily. If we see the tragedy of life under the sun and realize we have been redeemed from it, we *must* say something to somebody! And on a personal level, the fact David knew that after death he would not go on praising God in Heaven, resulted in him wanting to live his mortal life only to utter forth God's praise. The only reason he wanted to stay alive was to praise God (Ps. 6:5; 115:17,18). And Hezekiah too had something of this spirit.

We shouldn't see the mortality of man and the true meaning of the Hebrew word *nephesh* as a negative thing that we unfortunately have to tell people who believe their loved ones are alive in Heaven. " The voice" tells Isaiah to cry. " And I said, What shall I cry?" (Is. 40:6 LXX; RVmg.). What was to be the message of Isaiah's Gospel? The voice addresses Isaiah as " O thou that tellest good tidings" , and tells him the good news he is to preach. It is that " All flesh is grass...the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever" . The reality of man's mortality is the backdrop against which we

can see the eternity of God and the offer made to us through His abiding word that we really can escape from our condition. Christian preaching about "man is mortal" need not be bad news. The message can be turned into good news! For it was this message of mortality which prepared the way for men to accept Christ (Is. 40:3-5); the mountains of human pride are made low by this message so that we can accept salvation in Christ. 1 Pet. 1:24 RVmg. quotes these verses and concludes that we are being offered salvation through "the word of the God who liveth for ever" - the Gospel that is prefaced by the message of human mortality. God's eternity and man's mortality are placed side by side- and thus the way is prepared for the wonder of the fact that through "the word" of Jesus, of the Gospel, we the mortal are invited to share in that immortality.

The fact that sin really does result in eternal death, and that death is really unconsciousness, there is no immortal soul, the Hebrew word *nephesh* doesn't mean that, leads us to preach the hope of resurrection which we have. It must do- for otherwise we would be plain selfish. And it makes us realize for ourselves the decisiveness and finality of this life's decisions for the determining of eternal destiny. The hope of resurrection is the first and most basic need of our fellows. It was said of the 18th century British preacher Richard Baxter that "he preached as a dying man to dying men" (2). Our mortality, and our appreciation of that of others, should lead to an intensity of appeal to them. Knowing the truth about death leads to a great desire to testify to others. Recall how the rich man in the parable, once he perceived the truth about the death state, earnestly wished to testify to his brethren and persuade them to believe (Lk. 16:28). Elie Wiesel tells how victims of the holocaust either facing death or reflecting upon it later, felt an overbearing desire to testify to others: "We [victims of the holocaust] have all been witnesses and we all feel we have to bear testimony... and that became an obsession, the single most powerful obsession that permeated all the lives, all the dreams, all the work of those people. One minute before they died they thought that was what they had to do" (3). We don't- quite- have to go through those starings of death in the face to perceive death as we should; for the Bible has a lot to say about it, and if we accept the Biblical definitions, then we too will feel this strong compulsion to testify to others.

Not Being Materialistic

Ps. 49:16-20, in its context, warns against striving for material things and not envying the rich, because death for them is an eternal unconsciousness. And more positively, because there can be no activity, mentally or physically, in the grave...*therefore now* is the time to live a life active to the absolute maximum possibility in the Lord's service (Ecc. 9:10-12). Much of the Preacher's message is built on the tragic finality of death being an imperative to present action. He has some fine images of this finality; the silver cord breaks in just one link, and the beautiful bowl of life, of this body, crashes to the dusty floor and smashes; the rope holding the bucket breaks and it plunges irretrievably into the well; and as David observed, in death we are as water spilt on the ground on a hot day, which cannot be gathered up. We are as children who have dropped their precious sweets in the dust, fraught with the realization they are spoilt for good and there are no more. They may look up to us for more, and with as much pain in our eyes as is in theirs, we turn out our pockets to show there are no more. And so the tragedy of the human experience teaches us to live life in the Lord's service to the full, not frittering it away on the crosswords and telly and time-wasters of this world. Moses pleaded with God to make time-frittering Israel see the implications of their mortality; having eloquently spoken of the tragedy of our mortality, he concludes: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps. 90:12). Ps. 39:4-6 has the same theme: because of the mortality of man, there is utterly no point in being "disquieted in vain" on

account of amassing wealth. Ps. 90:6 speaks of the brevity of human life: "In the morning it flourishes, and grows up; in the evening it is cut down and withers"; but these words are quoted very positively in James 1:11 as speaking about the transience of wealth, and how wealth like the person who trusts in them will soon wither. Note the identity drawn between wealth and the person who trusts in it. If we truly feel and understand that man is mortal, we will not identify ourselves with riches nor trust in them as if they are eternal.

Because we brought nothing into the world and can carry nothing out, i.e. because of our very nature, we shouldn't be materialistic and should be content (1 Tim. 6:7,8). In saying this, Paul is alluding to how Job faced up to the reality of our condition by saying that we entered this world naked and return naked (Job 1:21). Paul is saying that we are all in Job's position, facing up to the loss of all things, and should count it a blessing to have even clothing. David said that just because "our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding", therefore he wanted to be as generous as possible in providing for the work of God's house (1 Chron. 29:14-16). So sure is the hope of resurrection that the Lord interpreted God being the God of Abraham as meaning that to Him, Abraham was living. Death is no barrier to God's continuing identity with His people. His faith in the resurrection is so sure that He speaks of death as if it is not. And in our weakness, we seek to look beyond the apparent finality of death likewise. Because David firmly believed in a resurrection, "my heart was glad and my tongue rejoiced; moreover also my flesh shall tabernacle in hope" (Acts 2:26 RV). His whole life 'tabernacled in hope' because of what he understood about resurrection. This was and is the power of basics. Yet we can become almost over-familiar with these wonderful ideas such as resurrection.

Zeal

Perhaps the Lord was speaking in a kind of soliloquy when He mused that "the night cometh, when no man can work", and therefore man should walk and work while he has the light (Jn. 9:4, quoting Ecc. 9:10). He was speaking, in the context, not only of His own zeal to 'work' while He had life, but also applying this to His followers.

It's only when faced with death that we realize the crucial and wonderful importance of every hour which we've been given to live. Facing death as he thought, Job reflected upon the tragic brevity and speed of passing of human life, and the true meaning of the Hebrew word *nephesh*: "My days sprint past me like runners; I will never see them again. They glide by me like sailboats..." (Job 9:25). Life is indeed racing by; time management, and freeing our real selves from all the myriad things which compete to take up our time, become of vital importance once we realize this. There is only one ultimate thing worth studying, striving after, labouring for, reading about, working towards... and grasping the mortality of man inspires us in living out this understanding. TV, novels, endless surfing of the internet, engagement in pointless communication and discussion in this communication-crazy world... all this beguiles us of life itself.

Maturity In Behaviour

The more we number our days, i.e. perceive our mortality, the more we will give our hearts to finding and living wisdom (Ps. 90:12). The tragic brevity of life means that "childhood and youth are vanity", we should quit the time wasting follies of youth or overgrown childhood (and the modern world is full of this), and therefore too "remove anger from thy heart and put away evil from thy flesh" (Ecc. 11:10 AVmg.). Ecclesiastes uses the mortality of man not

only as an appeal to work for our creator, but to simply have faith in His existence. Likewise: " We had the sentence of death in ourselves [" in our hearts we felt the sentence of death" , NIV], *that* we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). The fact we are going to die, relatively soon, and lie unconscious...drives the man who seriously believes it to faith in the God of resurrection. It seems that at a time of great physical distress, Paul was made to realize that in fact he had " the sentence of death" within him, he was under the curse of mortality, and this led him to a hopeful faith that God would preserve him from the ultimate " so great a death" as well as from the immediate problems. Death being like a sleep, it follows that judgment day is our next conscious experience after death. Because death is an ever more likely possibility for us, our judgment is effectively *almost upon us*. And we must live with and in that knowledge.

We know very well that sin brings death. But we sin. Smoking brings lung cancer. We know. But we humans do it. We can know that sin brings death as theory; and we can *really* know it. Ez. 18:14 RVmg speaks of the son who " seeth all his father's sins, which he hath done, and seeth, and doeth not such like" . He sees the sins, and then he really sees them, and doesn't do them. This is how we must be in our registering of the fact that sin really brings death.

Humble Attitude To Others

In God's judgment of men it will be made apparent that it was so inappropriate for man who is made of dust to oppress his fellows (Ps. 10:18 RV). Respect of others is sorely lacking in our selfish natures. But the more we reflect upon our own insignificance, as creatures of dust, the more we will see that abuse of others in any form is inappropriate. And we don't have to wait till judgment day to perceive this- for we know the mortality and constitution of man from basic Bible teaching. This link between our mortality and humility is brought out in Paul's description of our present state as being " the body of our humiliation" (Phil. 3:21 RV). Believing we are mortal ought to be a humbling thing.

Some of the finest statements of human mortality are to be found in Job's answers to his friends. But those statements have a context. Job was a "perfect man", afflicted by God, and the friends assumed that this meant that Job had therefore sinned and was being punished for his sin by those afflictions. They practiced a form of spiritual and psychological abuse upon Job, telling him to fess up and repent, accusing him of self-righteousness, insisting that they were older than him, his spiritual elders, and that all other elders, along with those who had gone before, agreed with them. Job searched his life and couldn't agree with them. He held fast to his integrity rather than being broken down by their insistence that he was an awful sinner. In this context, Job reminded those elders that they were only mortal, with "bodies of clay" (Job 13:2,12), and therefore he didn't have to automatically accept them as being right and himself as wrong, dirty and evil, just because they said he was. This, then, is another outcome of believing that man is mortal- we won't allow ourselves to be abused by men, whatever they tell us to feel about ourselves; for we will hold to our belief that they are only mortal, not infallible, and *their* view of us need not to be *our* view of ourselves. Sadly this point has to be carried in mind when faced with the spiritually abusive tactics of many 'elders' in the Christian community, who seek to devalue their flock in their own eyes, in order to have their subservience and obedience.

Control Of Our Words

Ps. 39:1-6 makes a connection between appreciating our mortality, and controlling our words in the presence of those who provoke us. David calmed himself down when “my heart was hot within me” by asking God to remind him of “mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am” (Ps. 39:4). Again, a very basic Bible principle resulted in something poignantly practical. In the very moment of hot blood, under provocation, David silently asked to appreciate personally the mortality of man; so that he wouldn’t respond with hard words, and would ‘keep his mouth with a bridle’.

Care For The Body

Nephesh is indeed translated both 'soul' and 'body'. The false dichotomy made between the two by believers in the wrong notion of an 'immortal soul' leads to a neglect of the body, even an abuse of it. And of course, if this life isn't so important, the body is merely a box in which the 'immortal soul' is stored- then the tendency will be to abuse or disregard the body. Recognition that we don't have an immortal soul heightens the wonder and importance of the human body.

Faith In God

The acceptance of human frailty heightens and intensifies our real acceptance of truths which we had perhaps only academically accepted earlier. There is an intensity associated with the death experience which is designed to give us the opportunity to believe as we really should. Jeremiah had explained to Judah that we are all but clay in the hand of a Divine potter (Jer. 18:4-6), but it was only the up close experience of death during the sacking of Jerusalem by the Babylonians which lead Jeremiah to exclaim how the once handsome sons of Zion were indeed "esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter!" (Lam. 4:2). He came to exclaim with personal belief what he had previously understood and even preached as theory.

Our faith in God is mitigated against by our misplaced faith in humanity. We would rather trust a doctor, a repair man, a kind neighbour, before throwing ourselves upon God as a last resort. "Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils: for wherein is he to be accounted of" (Is. 2:22) compared to the great God of Israel? Job 27:9,10 seems to be saying [although the Hebrew text and use of the Hebrew word *nephesh* is rather obscure] that every man on his deathbed cries to God in some kind of prayer; but a belief in the mortality of man will result in the righteous man having lived a life of prayerful crying to the Father, which will be in context with his final cry to God in his time of dying. A true sense of our mortality will lead to our prayerful, urgent contact with the Father all our days. Thus destruction and death give insight into the true wisdom (Job 28:22). The spirit / life force is given by God and taken back by God. Hence man is unconscious after death. But this very basic fact is used by Elihu as reason to believe that the God who is so in control of men is therefore a just and righteous God, who means only good for us and not evil (Job 34:14,15,17). These conclusions and the comfort they contain are based by Elihu upon a simple understanding of the fact that it is God who gives the spirit / life-force, and it is God who takes it away again.

Freedom From Fear

The mortality of humanity is used as a comfort to the downtrodden people of God in Is. 51:12: "I, even I, am he that comforts you: who art you to be afraid of man that shall die, and of the son of man that shall be made as grass?". Because man is mortal... don't fear man, but

rather God. And this is to be a *comfort* to us. God chose His message of comfort to be simply: "Man is mortal!". Is. 40:6-8 has the same basic message of *comfort* through the message of human mortality and weakness. For it is our fear of others, of their opinions and judgments, which causes so much *discomfort* to so many.

The Bible has so much to say about death, depicting us as having a "body of death" (Rom. 7:24). And yet humanity generally doesn't want to seriously consider death. Yet death is the moment of final truth, which makes all men and women ultimately equal, destroying all the categories into which we place people during our or their lives. If we regularly read and accept the Bible's message, death, with all its intensity and revelation of truth and the ultimate nature of human issues, is something which is constantly before us, something we realistically face and know, not only in sickness or at funerals. And the realness, the intensity, the truth... which comes from this will be apparent in our lives.

And yet the fear of death grips our society more than we like to admit. The Swiss psychologist Paul Tournier observed the huge "number of people who dream that they are locked in, that everywhere they come up against iron-bound and padlocked doors, that they absolutely must escape, and yet there is no way out" (4). This is the state of the nation, this is how we naturally are, this is the audience to which we preach. And we preach a freedom from that fear. Because the Lord Jesus was of our human nature- and here perhaps more than anywhere else we see the crucial practical importance of doctrine- we are freed from the ranks of all those who through fear of death live their lives in bondage (Heb. 2:15). For He died for us, as our representative. How true are those inspired words. "To release them who through fear / phobos of death were all their living-time subject to slavery" (Gk.). Nearly all the great psychologists concluded that the mystery of death obsesses humanity; and in the last analysis, all anxiety is reduced to anxiety about death. You can see it for yourself, in how death, or real, deep discussion of it, is a taboo subject; how people will make jokes about it in reflection of their fear of seriously discussing it. People, even doctors, don't quite know what to say to the dying. There can be floods of stories and chit-chat... all carefully avoiding any possible allusion to death. This fear of death, in which the unredeemed billions of humanity have been in bondage, explains the fear of old age, the unwillingness to accept our age for what it is, our bodies for how and what they are, or are becoming. I'm not saying of course that the emotion of fear or anxiety is totally removed from our lives by faith. The Lord Jesus in Gethsemane is proof enough that these emotions are an integral part of being human, and it's no sin to have them. I'm talking of fear in it's destructive sense, the fear of death which is rooted in a lack of hope. There's a passage in *Hamlet* which speaks of not so much fearing death as "the dread of something after death" (some of the sentiments in Job 18 are similar). And modern psychoanalytical studies have confirmed this. A large part of the fear of death is the fear of what follows. For those in Christ, whilst like their Lord they may naturally fear the process of death, their future is secured; they know that death is unconsciousness and will end ultimately in a bodily resurrection at the Lord's return, after which they will share in His eternal life. For them, "the fear of death" in its ultimate form has been removed (Heb. 2:14-18).

Death is not only a master which keeps humanity in servitude; it does this because in many ways it remains a mystery. It's not only that doctor's don't know what to really say to the dying; the mass of efforts in the world's religions to deal with it have in some ways all ended in failure in practice. The enigma and mystery of death continues for so many. Robert Lifton very extensively studied attitudes to death, and concluded that we have "no adequate way to relate to death's reality and potential, so it is dealt with by a numbness that denies" (5). This

seems true for the world in general; but if we understand Bible teaching about death, it will not be the case for us. We'll be able to face death in the eye, without any of "the numbness that denies" which is so popular.

All this explains why there is in this world what Walter Brueggemann called "a dread of endings" (6). Mankind generally prefers to live in an "eternal now", where the final end-death- isn't thought of; as if the whole world is turned in their minds into a Las Vegas casino with no clocks and without time. But sometime, the gambler must walk out of the casino and glance at his watch or see the time displayed somewhere, one day too we each come to our human end. For us who understand not only Bible teaching about death, but also the insistent Biblical emphasis upon it, we don't live life in an eternal now. We live now for tomorrow, joyful in our awareness of the eternal consequence of our actions and personalities beyond the grave, knowing that all our beliefs, actions, faith, character developments- all come to their ultimate term before the judgment seat of Christ. In speaking of our mortality and our longing for immortality, Paul comments that "He that has wrought us for the selfsame thing is God" (2 Cor. 5:5). The reference to how God "wrought us" would appear to comment upon the mortality of our bodies; human mortality [when correctly understood] makes us long for the coming of the Lord to clothe us with our new nature which is to be brought to us from Heaven (2 Cor. 5:2). God "wrought us" as He did in order to enable us to have this longing. According to the Bible, the spirit of man is God's. He gave us that life force (Is. 42:5), and at death "the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecc. 12:7). If we seriously believe this, then we will see death as an opportunity to give back to God what He gave us, namely our very life force. If in our lives we followed this principle, realizing nothing we 'have' is really ours but His, and therefore we were open handed with our possessions and knowledge of Him, freely giving it out as it were to Him, then giving back our life force to Him will be but a natural progression from this way of living. And thus we will see immortality not as something we personally crave for our own benefit, but rather a further opportunity to reflect back to Him, to His glory. Thus understanding Bible truth about death affects how we face death and eternity, and therefore radically influences our lives now.

Notes

(1) Paul Tournier, *The Whole Person In A Broken World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1964 ed.), p. 165.

(2) As quoted in Lewis Drummond, *Evangelism: The Counter-Revolution* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972) p. 31.

(3) Elie Wiesel, "The holocaust as literary inspiration", in E. Wiesel, L.S. Dawidowicz, D. Rabinowitz and R.M. Brown, *Dimensions Of The Holocaust* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977) p. 9.

(4) Paul Tournier, *Learn To Grow Old* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) p. 169.

(5) See R.J. Lifton & Eric Olson, *Living And Dying* (New York: Praeger, 1974) p. 137; R.J. Lifton, *Survivors Of Hiroshima* (New York: Random House, 1967) p. 474 and R.J. Lifton, *History And Human Survival* (New York: Random House, 1961) p. 175.

(6) Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) p. 50.

2.19 The devil is a common figure for our own sinfulness; sin and temptation comes from within. The real arena of spiritual conflict is the human heart; there is no external devil in the commonly accepted sense.

The fact that the Lord Jesus really conquered the devil should mean for us that in our struggles against sin, victory is ultimately certain.

Battle For The Mind, Not Blaming Others

If we grasp this, we will battle daily for control of the mind, we will strive to fill our mind with God's word, we will do our daily readings, we will be cynical of our motivations, we will examine ourselves, we will appreciate the latent liability to sin which we and all men have by nature. We won't take the weakness of others towards us so personally; we will see it is their 'devil'. Belief in a personal devil is so popular, because it takes the focus away from our own struggle with our innermost nature and thoughts. Yet whilst we don't believe in a personal devil, we can create the same thing in essence; we can create an external devil such as TV or Catholicism, and feel that our entire spiritual endeavour must be directed to doing battle with these things, rather than focusing on our own desperation. A lack of focus on personal sinfulness and the need for personal cleansing and growth, with the humility this will bring forth, can so easily give place to a focus instead upon something external to us as the real enemy ⁽¹⁾. Realizing who 'the devil' really is inspires us to more concretely fight against him. Albert Camus in his novel *The Rebel* develops the theme that "man is never greater than when he is in revolt, when he commits himself totally to the struggle against an unjust power, ready to sacrifice his own life to liberate the oppressed". Once we have the enemy clearly defined, we can rise up to that same struggle and challenge. Truly, man is never greater when he's in the one and only true revolt worth making, and sacrificing life for the ultimate cause.

We should not blame our nature for our moral failures in the way that orthodox Christians blame an external devil. We must hang our head over every sin we commit and every act of righteousness which we omit. In this we will find the basis for a true appreciation of grace, a true motivation for works of humble response, a true flame of praise within us, a realistic basis for a genuine humility. Dorothy Sayers in *Begin Here* correctly observes: "It is true that man is dominated by his psychological make-up, but only in the sense that an artist is dominated by his material". We really *can* achieve some measure of self control; it cannot be that God is angry with us simply because we are human. It cannot be that our nature forces us to sin in a way which we can never counteract. If this were true, the anger of God would have been against His own spotless Son, who fully shared our nature. The Lord shared our nature and yet didn't commit sin, and in this He is our ever beckoning example and inspiration. The question 'What would Jesus do...?' in this or that situation has all the more inspirational power once we accept that the Lord Jesus, tempted just as we are, managed to put the devil to death within Him, triumphing over it in the cross, even though He bore our nature. People parrot offphrases like "I'm a sinner", 'going to heaven', 'satan', without the faintest idea what they are really saying. And we can do just the same- we can speak of 'Sin' with no real idea what we ought to feel and understand by this.

The Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tournier wrote an incisive and brilliant study, *Violence et puissance*- in English translation, *The Violence Within* ⁽²⁾. From wide experience of practicing psychotherapy and investigating the causes of various neuroses, Tournier discerned that within each person there is a huge battle between the right and the wrong, good and evil,

temptation and resistance to temptation. This battle goes on constantly, over even the most insignificant things- e.g. the choice to take an instant dislike to another person, to get angry and aggressive because we feel a person in a restaurant is somehow laughing at us, etc. Most people on earth wouldn't agree with the religious / theological conclusions we have reached- that the devil refers not to a 'fallen Angel' or supernatural being but rather to our own internal temptations which battle with us, as Peter says, like a roaring lion. Yet in practice, a psychiatric analysis of human beings reveals that indeed, like it or not, the 'violence within' is not only very real, but a fundamental part of our moment by moment spiritual experience. Along with Tournier, the French sociologist Claude Levi-Strauss came to the same conclusions, written up in his classic *The Savage Mind* - a book whose title says it all (3). I mean that our Biblical / theological conclusions about the devil are actually confirmed by psychotherapy and psychiatric analysis of people. Our conclusions are true in practical experience, even if people don't want to accept the way we express them Biblically because they have a tradition of believing that the real problem is the supposed violence from without, supposedly perpetrated by a supernatural 'devil'. And here doctrine comes to have a biting practical relevance- for if we truly perceive and believe that in fact 'the devil' and its power has been vanquished in Jesus, if we survey the wondrous cross and see there the power of the devil finally slaughtered in the perfect mind of the Lord Jesus as He hung there, and that ultimate victory of victories shared with us who are in Him... the source, the root cause, of so much neurosis and dysfunction, is revealed to us as powerless. For we who have given in and do give in to temptation, who submit to 'the violence within' all too often, who are at times beaten in the fight, have been saved from the power of that defeat by grace and forgiveness, and are counted by the God of all grace as being 'in Christ'. Thus the whole thing becomes what Frederick Buechner called *The Magnificent Defeat*. The Lord Jesus was the one who overcame that 'violence within' moment by moment, as well as in the more accentuated and obvious scenes of 'the violence within' which we see in the wilderness temptations and on the cross. And by grace, we are counted as in Him. No wonder that to achieve this He had to share human nature, to have 'the violence within', in order to overcome it. Perfectly and seamlessly, to my mind at least, one true aspect of Biblical interpretation thus leads to another, and becomes the basis for a transformed life in practice. In all this we see the matchless, surpassing beauty of how God works with humanity towards our salvation.

Self-talk

It would be fair to say that the Biblical devil refers to our self-talk- the very opposite of the external devil idea. Jesus pinpointed the crucial importance of self-talk in His parable of the rich fool, who said to himself that he had many goods, and discussed with his own "soul" the need for greater barns etc. (Lk. 12:17-19). If we at least realize that our self-talk is potentially our greatest adversary ['satan'], then we will find the strength to move towards genuine spiritual mindedness, bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. Paul's wording here suggests that naturally our "every thought" is not obedient to Christ; and this is his way of speaking about 'the devil'.

Dt. 15:9 has Moses warning Israel: "Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart". The Hebrew for 'thought' really means 'word'- the idea is to ensure that you don't have a self-talk that says... that because the year of release was coming up soon, therefore you would not lend your brother anything, knowing that you had to forgive him the debt in the year of release. Here we have the OT equivalent of the New Testament 'devil'. We *can* control our self-talk, but we must be aware that it takes place. Moses is basically saying:

‘Beware of your own self talk; see how you speak to yourself in unfinished sentences like “The year of release is at hand...”, resulting in you ‘finishing the sentence’ by unkind deeds’.

Perceiving the reality and power of our own self-talk is one outcome of truly comprehending who the devil is. Ps. 36:1 warns: " Sin speaks to the wicked man in his heart" (Heb.). The path of Cain involved reviling what he did not understand (Jude 10,11). He didn't understand, or didn't let himself understand, the principles of sacrifice, and so he reviled his brother and God's commands, he became a true child of the Biblical devil- because he didn't *understand*.

Our self-talk actually defines where we go in our relationships. If we have a certain ‘self-talk’ opinion of someone and yet speak and act nicely to them, sooner or later we won’t be able to keep up the act any longer. I remember underlining a phrase of Soren Kierkegaard, quite stunned by how intensely true it was, and how much truth is compacted by him into so few words: “An unconscious relationship is more powerful than a conscious one”. This says it all. What you say to yourself about your wife, how you analyze to yourself the actions of your child... this has the real power, far beyond any forms of words and outward behaviour we may show. Yet sadly, this world thinks that *how* you say things is all important; it’s a running away from the importance and crucial value of the real self within. And it’s yet another reason why self-talk is crucial to true, real living and spiritual development. And this is all an outflow from a clear grasp of the fact that the real satan is the adversary of our own internal thoughts, and not some external devil or some guy who fell off the 99th floor back in the Garden of Eden.

Notes

(1) These thoughts are well developed in David Levin, *Legalism And Faith* (21), Tidings, 9/2000 p. 329.

(2) Paul Tournier, *The Violence Within*, translated by Edwin Hudson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

(3) Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1961).

The Implications And Origins Of Belief In A Personal Satan

The conclusions which we have come to in our studies about the devil may appear freaky, and unsupported by many churches. But it should be appreciated that we are far from alone in having come to these conclusions. Well known writers from more orthodox backgrounds have come to just the same conclusions.

Stephen Mitchell, in a much acclaimed and well publicized book published by none other than Harper Collins, observes that throughout Job, “there is no attempt to deflect ultimate responsibility by blaming a devil or an original sin”⁽¹⁾. And Mitchell says this in the context of commenting upon Job 9:24, where having spoken of the problem of calamity, Job concludes: “Who does it, if not he [God]?”. And of course at the end of the book, God confirms Job as having spoken truly about Him. Mitchell observes that Job ends “with a detailed presentation of two creatures, the Beast and the Serpent... both creatures are, in fact, central figures in ancient near-eastern eschatology, the embodiments of evil that the sky-god battles and conquers... this final section of the Voice from the Whirlwind is a criticism of conventional, dualistic theology. *What is all this foolish chatter about good and evil*, the Voice says, *about battles between a hero-god and some cosmic opponent? Don’t you*

understand that there is no one else in here? These huge symbols of evil, so terrifying to humans... are presented as God's playthings". And so Mitchell comes to the very same conclusions as we have outlined here- there is in the end only God, and He is not in struggle with any super-human 'devil' in Heaven. And this is in fact the whole lesson of the book of Job. Even if such a mythical being is thought to exist, as it was in Job's time, the essential point is that God is *so* much greater than such a puny 'devil' that He can play games with him. John Robinson, one time Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, came to some similar conclusions, albeit less clearly expressed, in his classic *In The End God* ⁽²⁾. The Christian psychotherapist Paul Tournier also came to the same view about the devil which we've outlined elsewhere. He expresses what we've said Biblically in more modern jargon: "[We must] unmask the hidden enemy, which the Bible calls a devil, and which the psychoanalyst calls the superego: the false moral code, the secret and all-powerful veto which spoils and sabotages all that is best in a person's life, despite the sincerest aspirations of his conscious mind"^(2a).

Elaine Pagels

Elaine Pagels, Professor of Religion at Princeton University, is perhaps the highest profile writer and thinker to express agreement with our position about the devil. Her best selling book *The Origin Of Satan* is well worth a read if you're interested in this theme ⁽³⁾. She begins where we have done- that Christianity and Judaism taught only one God, and this left no place for a devil / satan in the orthodox sense. We have said time and again that one true doctrine leads to another, and Pagels grasps that clearly. One God means no devil. Simple as that. And so she comments: "Conversion from paganism to Judaism or Christianity, I realized, meant, above all, transforming one's perception of the invisible world". And this had a radically practical outworking- as does belief in any true Bible doctrine: "Becoming either a Jew or a Christian polarized a pagan's view of the universe, and moralized it". The pagan worldview would've felt that anything like a volcano or earthquake was a result of demonic activity. But instead, the Bible clearly describes the volcanoes that destroyed Sodom as coming from the one God, as judgment for their sins (Gen. 19:4). People were not just victims of huge cosmic forces; they had responsibility for their actions and met those consequences. We can easily miss the radical implications of the moral way the Bible describes such things which were otherwise attributed to demons /pagan gods. There was a huge political price attached to rejecting belief in 'demons'. Rusticus, prefect of Rome, persecuted Christians because they refused "to obey the gods and submit to the rulers". The Romans considered that their leaders were agents of the gods; and if the gods didn't exist, then the Roman leadership lost its power and authority. For this reason, the Romans called the Christians 'atheists'.

The following quotations from Pagels exactly reflect our own conclusions: "In the Hebrew Bible...Satan never appears as Western Christendom has come to know him, as the leader of an "evil empire", an army of hostile spirits who make war on God...in the Hebrew Bible, Satan is not necessarily evil, much less opposed to God. On the contrary, he appears in the book of Numbers and in Job as one of God's obedient servants- a messenger, or *angel*, a word that translates the Hebrew term for messenger (*mal'ak*) into Greek (*angelos*)... In biblical sources the Hebrew term the *satan* describes an adversarial role. It is not the name of a particular character... the root *stn* means "one who opposes, obstructs, or acts as an adversary"... But this messenger is not necessarily malevolent... John dismisses the device of the devil as an independent supernatural character... Paul holds a perception that Satan acts as God's agent not to corrupt people but to test them" (pp. 111, 183)".

But Elaine Pagels isn't just out there on her own. Neil Forsyth comments likewise: "In... the Old Testament, the word [satan] never appears as the name of the adversary... rather, when the satan appears in the Old Testament, he is a member of the heavenly court, albeit with unusual tasks"⁽⁴⁾. Several respected commentators have pointed out the same, especially when commenting upon the 'satan' in the book of Job- concluding that the term there simply speaks of an obedient Divine Angel acting the role of an adversary, without being the evil spirit being accepted by many in Christendom ⁽⁵⁾.

How Did Christianity Adopt Pagan Beliefs?

Pagels and other writers tackle the obvious question: Where, then, did the present idea of a literal evil being called satan come from, seeing it's not in the Bible? They trace the idea back to pagan sources that entered Judaism before the time of Christ- and then worked their way into Christian thought in the early centuries after Christ, as mainstream Christianity moved away from purely Biblical beliefs⁽⁶⁾. But pushing the question back a stage further, *why* and *how* did Judaism and later Christianity pick up pagan myths about a personal devil and sinful Angels and mix them in with their belief system? Pagels quotes sources such as the Jewish *Book of the Watchers* to show how there was a clear belief that each person has a 'guardian Angel', and when conflicts arose, people judged as 'wicked' or 'evil' came to be charged with therefore having a 'wicked' or 'evil' Angel controlling them. And it was an easy step to assume that these 'wicked Angels' were all under the control of a personal, superhuman Devil as widely believed in by surrounding pagans. The book of Jubilees (e.g. 15:31) made the association between pagan gods and demons. Jewish apostates who believed in the pagan gods, or who were accused of believing in them, were then seen as being somehow in league with them. And thereby those 'demons' were felt to be real beings, because the people they supposedly controlled were real people.

The Essenes were a Jewish sect who were in conflict with the rest of the Jews, whom they believed were condemned to damnation. They expressed this conflict between them and others in terms of a cosmic conflict between God- who they believed was on *their* side- and a personal Satan, whose followers they believed their enemies on earth were supporting. The more bitter the political conflict within Israel, the stronger was the appeal made to a supposed cosmic battle between good and evil, God and Satan. The result of this false doctrine was a demonizing of ones' opposition. And the same can easily happen today. The value of the human person is forgotten about, if we believe they are condemned, evil people who are the devil incarnate. The orthodox 'devil' can't be reconciled with. He can only be destroyed. And if we demonize people, we can never reconcile with them, only seek to destroy them. Here is where doctrine is important in practice. If there is no personal satan up there, and *all* people, our enemies included, are simply struggling against their own nature... then we can reach out to them, as fellow strugglers, understand them, seek to reconcile with them and seek their salvation.

Let's keep remembering that the Old Testament is silent about a 'satan' figure as widely believed in by Christendom. The Genesis record says nothing at all about sinful angels, a Lucifer, satan being cast out of Heaven etc. There seems significant evidence for believing that the idea of a personal devil first entered Judaism through their contact with the Persian religions whilst in captivity there. Rabbinic writings don't mention a personal satan until the Jews were in Babylon, and the references become more frequent as Persian influence upon Judaism deepened. This is why the monumental passages in Isaiah [e.g. Is. 45:5-7], addressed to the captive Jews, point out the error of the Persian idea that there is a good God in tension

with an evil god. Classically, the devil is understood to be a being with horns and a pitchfork. If we research *why* this should be the case, we soon find that the Bible itself is absolutely without any such images of satan or the devil. But we do find these images in pagan mythology- Pan, Dionysius and other pagan gods were depicted as having horns, long tails etc. In the British isles, let alone ancient Rome and Greece, there were traditions of 'horned gods' being the source of evil- e.g. the Cernunnos amongst the Celts, Caerwiden in Wales, etc. In so many ways, apostate Christianity adopted pagan ideas and brought them into its theology. These horned gods, with forks and long tails, became adopted into a false Christianity as 'the devil'. But the Bible itself is absolutely silent about this- nowhere is there any indication that satan or the devil is a personal being with horns etc.

Other studies in the history and developments of religion have shown that religious systems usually begin without a specific 'satan' figure; but as people struggle with the huge incidence of evil in the world, they end up creating such a figure in their theologies. It seems many people have a deeply psychological need to blame their sin, and the sin of others, on something outside of them; and so the idea of a personal satan has become popular. It's somewhere to simplistically dump all our struggles and disappointments and fears of ourselves and of the world in which we live. The struggle to understand, believe and love a God who portrays Himself in His word as the ultimate and only force, in a world of tsunamis, earthquakes, mass catastrophe- is indeed difficult. It's something all His children have to wrestle with, as children struggle with their parents' decisions and actions towards them which seem to them so unloving, unreasonable and pointless. It's surely a cop out to give up, and simplistically decide that our God isn't actually the only force and power around, but actually there is an evil god out there too. But this is indeed a cop out, as well as reflecting our own lack of faith and acceptance of the one true God simply because we don't ultimately understand Him, and because He doesn't act how we think He should act.

The Devil In John's Gospel

John's Gospel seeks to correct the false idea of a huge cosmic conflict. John frequently alludes to the ideas of light vs. darkness, righteousness vs. evil. But he correctly defines darkness and evil as the unbelief which exists within the human heart. Again, from this distance, we may read John's words and not perceive the radical, corrective commentary which he was really making against the common ideas of a personal Satan existing in Heaven, involved in some cosmic conflict up there. The real arena of the conflict, the essential struggle, according to John, is within the human heart, and it is between belief and unbelief in Jesus as the Son of God, with all that entails.

In the same way as the concept of 'demons' somewhat recedes throughout the Gospels, and the point is made that God's power is so great that effectively they don't exist- so it is with the 'Devil'. Judaism had taken over the surrounding pagan notion of a personal 'satan'. And the Lord Jesus and the Gospel writers use this term, but in the way they use it, they redefine it. The parable of the Lord Jesus binding the "strong man"- the devil- was really to show that the "devil" as they understood it was now no more, and his supposed Kingdom now taken over by that of Christ. The last Gospel, John, doesn't use the term in the way the earlier Gospels do. He defines what the earlier writers called "the devil" as actual people, such as the Jews or the brothers of Jesus, in their articulation of an adversarial ['satanic'] position to Jesus. Others have concluded likewise: "John never pictures satan.. as a disembodied being... John dismisses the device of the devil as an independent supernatural character"⁽⁷⁾... "In John, the idea of the devil [as a personal supernatural being] is completely absent"⁽⁸⁾.

Raymond Brown- one of the most well known Roman Catholic expositors of the 20th Century- concludes that ‘Satan’ doesn’t refer to a character in ‘his’ own right, but rather is a title referring to groups of *people* who play the role of adversaries or tempters⁽⁹⁾.

The Synoptics speak of how satan ‘comes to’ and tempts and challenges the Lord Jesus to claim earthly political power, which ‘satan’ can give him (Mt. 4:8,9). But John describes this in terms of “the people” coming to Him and trying to make Him King- which temptation He refused (Jn. 6:15). Likewise it was ‘the devil’ in the wilderness who tempted Jesus to make the stones into bread. But in Jn. 6:30,31, it is the Jewish people who offer Him the same temptation. In the wilderness, the Lord responded that man lives by the bread which comes from the mouth of God. In Jn. 6:32, He responds likewise by speaking about “the true bread from heaven”. The temptation from ‘the devil’ to publically display His Divine powers in front of Israel in the Jerusalem temple (Mt. 4:5,6; Lk. 4:9-12) is repeated by John in terms of the Lord’s brothers tempting Him to go up to the same temple and openly validate Himself “to the world” (Jn. 7:1-5).

Notes

(1) Stephen Mitchell, *The Book Of Job* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

(2) John Robinson, *In The End God* (London: James Clarke, 1950).

(2a) Paul Tournier, *The Person Reborn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) p. 6.

(3) Elaine Pagels, *The Origin Of Satan* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane / The Penguin Press, 1996).

(4) Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan And The Combat Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) p. 107.

(5) See P. Day, *An Adversary In Heaven: Satan In The Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta, GA: Scholar’s Press, 1988) pp 69-106.

(6) In addition to Pagels *op cit*, see Knut Schaferdick, “Satan in the Post Apostolic Fathers” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) Vol. 7 pp. 163-165 and George F. Moore, *Judaism In The First Centuries Of The Christian Era* Vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927).

(7) Elaine Pagels, *op cit* pp. 100,111.

(8) Gustave Hoennecke, *New Testament Studies* (Leipzig: Heinrichs, 1912) p. 208.

(9) Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According To John* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1966) pp. 364-376.

2.20 The correct definition of the Holy Spirit is the thinking and power of God. It works through God's word. The Bible was written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit and is therefore God's word.

Read The Bible And Let It Guide Your Prayer Requests

The sort of things we ask for in prayer will be affected by this; and we will read God's word with real reverence and fervour, knowing that this really is God's voice speaking to us, and that this really is the source of God's Holy Spirit which can work in our characters to bring about that transformation we fain would see. The wonder of the Bible, as God's very own self-revelation, will remain with us. True response to belief in the inspiration of the word is that we will truly believe (Jn. 19:35), and we will see the secrets of our heart disclosed (1

Cor. 14:25). Likewise, if we grasp the reality of the cross, the thoughts of our hearts will be revealed (Lk. 2:35). The power of basics leads to real self knowledge and self examination. If His words abide in us, we will ask what *we* desire and receive it, because we ask according to the will of God revealed in Scripture- and will have made His will, our will. And thus we will enter a positive upwards spiral in our prayer life with the Father.

Freedom From Guilt

The incorrect definition of the Holy Spirit as a force which uncontrollably 'zaps' a person and takes them over seems to me to be a way of avoiding taking responsibility for our own feelings and behaviours. Such an incorrect definition of the Holy Spirit deciding every issue of life for us can lead to unrealistic and simplistic approaches to life, giving us permission to avoid life's complexities and problems. It is a form of spiritual denial which provides pat solutions to our essential struggles. When it becomes evident that it hasn't worked, the individual excuses it by saying the Spirit left them or they have fallen into sin.

"The belief in the Holy Spirit, demons, and Satan removes responsibility for behaviour from the individual and places responsibility in the realm of spirits. A much healthier belief is that you are responsible for your own behaviour. Belief in external powers which invade and control is destructive" of the human person. Likewise a belief in Holy Spirit miracles as the solution to everything, at least in the way many Pentecostals express it, suggests that the power and responsibility to act exist somewhere outside the person. This results in fuzzy ego boundaries, confusion about what is self and what is separate from self, about who we are. Beliefs in Spirit or demon possession make us feel out of control. But consider how well Jesus knew Himself. In the wilderness He could speak to the 'devil' of His own temptations. He saw how clearly divided was the flesh and spirit within Him. This perhaps is why people could become so close to Jesus- for He was close to Himself, in touch with who He really was. And this, to me, is the great practical consequence of our understanding of the devil as being a personification for our inward sinfulness and tendency to sin. We know ourselves, we separate out what is us and what isn't, to the point that Paul could write what he did in Romans 7 about the separation of the two people within him. He understood clearly which one he identified with- "it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells within me".

Act Out Our Thinking

A caveat needs to be sounded about defining 'The Holy Spirit' as merely the power of God as naked power. Ancient civilizations understood the gods to be simply 'power'. This idea led Plato to conclude that because they were power, they were without passion, as power is abstract. Aristotle took the idea further, by writing of "divine impassibility"- a belief that gods couldn't be emotionally affected by anything outside them. And when apostate Christianity came to write up their creeds, they made the same mistake. The Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) condemned those who felt that God is "passible", i.e. able to suffer in His feelings. And in 1646 the Westminster Confession of Faith stated that God is "without... passions, immutable". This is awfully wrong. God has feelings. His power / actions reveal the passion of His thoughts and emotions. Israel often related to God as merely a 'power god' who would bring them victory. They made the same mistake; they didn't perceive Him as a real, live, personal God. But the Spirit of God isn't merely His power. Biblically, 'spirit' refers to both thoughts and power. The Spirit of God refers to how what He thinks and feels is actually revealed in His actions.

This is why the thoughts of God and the works of God are often paralleled- e.g. Ps. 92:5: "How great are thy works! And thy thoughts are very deep". What God thinks, He does. He isn't like so many of us, filled with vain, empty, powerless thoughts, which come to nothing in practice. And this is why His Spirit refers to both His thinking and the power which performs the actions which arise from this. And when we grasp the fact that His Spirit is to be our spirit, that we are to possess His Spirit... then the link between thought and action becomes a biting imperative for us too. We live in a world of empty thinking, of fine words and genuinely felt emotions as we consider grand ideas. But they don't seem to issue in very much at all. One of the leading features of our conversations appears to be enthusiastic talk, about possible projects, ideas, 'What's really needed is...' stuff... but I suspect that our generation more than any other fails to implement in practice even a fraction of what we speak about. Conversations between believers are so frequently like this. Yet God's Spirit is not just thinking, not mere abstractions; it is a power of action in accordance with His thinking. And it means that although God could do anything He likes, He doesn't. As Leonardo Boff put it, "God...is weak in power but strong in love".

2.21 The Lord Jesus shared our temptations; He was a man of our nature, Jesus didn't pre-exist.

2 Jn. 11 speaks of how teaching that Jesus was not truly human is associated with "evil works". Surely the implication is that good works are inspired by a true understanding of the Lord's humanity, and evil works by a refusal to accept this teaching. The tests of genuineness which John commanded centred around two simple things: Do those who come to you hold true understanding of the nature of Jesus; and do they love. The two things go together. And they are a fair test even today. For where there is no love, the true doctrine of Jesus is not truly believed, no matter how nicely it is expressed in words and writing.

Bold Prayer And Witness

Therefore in the daily round of life, He will be a living reality, like David we will behold the Lord Jesus before our face all the day. We will really believe that forgiveness is possible through the work of such a representative; and the reality of his example will mean the more to us, as a living inspiration to rise above our lower nature. Appreciating the doctrines of the atonement enables us to pray acceptably; "we have boldness and access with confidence by *the Faith*" - not just 'by faith', but as a result of *the Faith* (Eph. 3:12). Hebrews so often uses the word "therefore"; *because of* the facts of the atonement, we can *therefore* come boldly before God's throne in prayer, with a true heart and clear conscience (Heb. 4:16). This "boldness" which the atonement has enabled will be reflected in our being 'bold' in our witness (2 Cor. 3:12; 7:4); our experience of imputed righteousness will lead us to have a confidence exuding through our whole being. This is surely why 'boldness' was such a characteristic and watchword of the early church (Acts 4:13,29,31; Eph. 3:12; Phil. 1:20; 1 Tim. 3:13; Heb. 10:19; 1 Jn. 4:17). Stephen truly believed that the Lord Jesus stood as his representative and his advocate before the throne of grace. Although condemned by an earthly court, he confidently makes his appeal before the court of Heaven (Acts 7:56). Doubtless he was further inspired by the basic truth that whoever confesses the Lord Jesus before men, He will confess him before the angels in the court of Heaven (Lk. 12:8).

The connection between the atonement and faith in prayer is also brought out in 2 Cor. 1:20 RSV: "For all the promises of God in him are yea. That is why we utter the Amen through him". The promises of God were confirmed through the Lord's death, and the fact that He

died as the seed of Abraham, having taken upon Him Abraham's plural seed in representation (Rom. 15:8,9). Because of this, " we utter the Amen through [on account of being in] Him" . We can heartily say 'Amen', so be it, to our prayers on account of our faith and understanding of His atoning work.

Love

The fact the Lord Jesus didn't pre-exist as a person needs some meditation. The kind of thoughts that come to us as we stand alone at night, gazing into the sky. It seems evident that there must have been some kind of previous creation(s), e.g. for the creation of the Angels. God existed from infinity, and yet only 2,000 years ago did He have His only and His *begotten* Son. And that Son was a human being in order to save humans- only a few million of us (if that), who lived in a 6,000 year time span. In the specter of infinite time and space, this is wondrous. That the Only Son of God should die for a very few of us here, we who crawled on the surface of this tiny planet for such a fleeting moment of time. He died so that God could work out our salvation; and the love of God for us is likened to a young man marrying a virgin (Is. 62:5). Almighty God, who existed from eternity, is likened to a first timer, with all the intensity and joyful expectation and lack of disillusion. And more than this. The Jesus who didn't pre-exist but was like me, died for *me*, in the shameful way that He did. Our hearts and minds, with all their powers, are in the boundless prospect lost. His pure *love* for us, His condescension, should mean that we also ought to reach out into the lives of all men, never thinking they are beneath us or too insignificant or distant from us. No wonder 1 Jn. 4:15,16 describes believing that Jesus is the Son of God as believing the love that God has to us.

True Christianity holds that personal relationships matter more than anything in this world, and that the truly human way to live is- in the last analysis- to lovingly, constantly, unreservedly give ourselves away to God and to others. And yet this is ultimately rooted in the fact that we are seeking above all else to follow after the example of Jesus. This example is only real and actual because of the total humanity of Jesus. As He taught these things, so He lived them. The word of love was made flesh in Him. At the deepest level of personhood, His was the one perfect human life which this world has seen. And exactly because of His humanity, exactly because He was not " very God" but " the man Christ Jesus" , because Jesus didn't pre-exist, we have the pattern for our lives and being. To claim Jesus was " God" is to depersonalize Him; it destroys the wonder of His character and all He really was and is and will ever be.

The Reality Of Judgment

We will be judged in the man Christ Jesus (Acts 17:31 R.V. Mg.). This means that the very fact Jesus didn't pre-exist and was human makes Him our constant and insistent judge of all our human behaviour. And exactly because of this, Paul argues, we should right now repent. He is judge exactly because He is the Son of man.

Conclusion

John makes such a fuss about believing that Jesus came in the flesh because he wants his brethren to have the same Spirit that was in Jesus dwelling in *their* flesh (1 Jn. 4:2,4). He wants them to see that being human, being in the flesh, is no barrier for God to dwell in. As

Jesus was in the world, so are we to be in the world (1 Jn. 4:17 Gk.). *This* is why it's so important to understand that the Lord Jesus was genuinely human- His flesh was our flesh.

2.22 Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

The Life Of Love

1 Jn. strongly links belief in Christ Jesus as the Son of God with a life of true love. They had heard from "the beginning" of their contact with the Gospel that Christ was the Son of God; and yet also "from the beginning" they had been taught the need to love one another. The "message" which they had heard from the beginning was that Christ was the Son of God (1 Jn. 2:24); and yet it was also that we should love one another (1 Jn. 3:11). This is why in the context of teaching the need for love, John warns against false teaching regarding the nature of Christ as Son of God (1 Jn. 2:22,23; 4:1-4; 2 Jn. 7-11). "The word...from the beginning" was the 'logos' of Christ (Jn. 1:1-3); and yet in John's letters, the word from the beginning was that we should love each other (1 Jn. 2:7; 3:11). This is the essence of belief in Christ: love for each other. This is where the doctrine of Christ as the Son of God leads.

Defend The Faith

And for this reason, Paul pronounces an 'anathema' upon both those who teach another doctrinal Gospel, "another Jesus" (Gal. 1:8,9); as well as those who do not love the Lord Jesus personally (1 Cor. 16:22). John's writings are filled with two themes: Defend the Faith doctrinally, especially concerning the nature and person of Jesus; and... love one another. "This is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another" (3:23). "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him" [i.e. your brother]. "If we love one another, God dwelleth in us...whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him" (4:12,15). But why is there this link between love, and belief in Jesus of Nazareth being the begotten Son of God? Theologically, it could be said that if we accept Jesus Christ as the son of God, then we must likewise accept all God's other sons, begotten as they are by His Spirit. But practically, are we not being taught to see the *pure wonder* of the way in which *Almighty God had a Son* and gave that Son, so freely and so painfully, for us...? The *pure wonder* of God having a Son of our nature, a child and then a man who showed us the essence of God displayed in human flesh and temptation; and then giving Him to us... If we see this, we will naturally show love to our brethren. So it isn't just a case of thinking yes, we believe Christ was Son of God, not God the Son- and period. No. There's infinitely more to it than this. This faith and understanding can tear down every barrier between men, and provide the inspiration for a life of true, self-sacrificial love. The true *wonder* of it all simply must be meditated upon. That God's very own son should begin so small, as an ovum, "a single fertilized egg barely visible to the naked eye, an egg that would divide and redivide until a fetus took shape, enlarging cell by cell inside a nervous teenager".

Confidence

Because Jesus was the *only* Son of God, therefore He is *full* of the Father's grace and truth. Jn. 1:14 makes this connection between fullness and only Sonship. Because of the wonder of this, we should therefore hear Him, respecting and thereby obeying His word simply because of our appreciation of who He is and was- the Son of God (Lk. 9:35). Quite simply, to *truly*

believe in Jesus as Son of God means that we will have a sure Hope of passing beyond the gates of the grave into the Kingdom (Mt. 16:16 cp. 18).

Yet we can become over familiar with this most basic of all spiritual realities: that Jesus is the Son of God. We know it, and yet we can not know it in practice. Joseph and Mary believed Jesus was the Son of God; Mary of all humanity was the one who knew this most strongly. And yet when they took Jesus up to the temple at age 12, they were so swamped with all the human distractions that they forgot the obvious implications of His being God's son- not Jesus-ben-Joseph. She even scolded Him that " his father" , Joseph, had been worried about Him. " How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be in my Father's house?" (Lk. 2:49 RV) was His comment: as if to say 'Come on, if we go to Jerusalem, isn't it obvious to you I would go to my Father's house whilst there? That's where you could find me...'.

2.23 Jesus never sinned

Giving To The Poor

The extent to which this man from Nazareth, who sneezed and slept and thirsted as we do, was really God manifest in the flesh, that the human Jesus never sinned...this needs sustained personal meditation. That from the larynx of a Palestinian Jew really came forth the words of Almighty God, in the timbre and rural accent of a Jewish countryman; to the extent that it had to be said that never man spake like this man; and He Himself could assure us that heaven and earth would pass, but not His words (note the links with Ps. 102:25-27; Heb. 1:10-12)...that the righteousness of God Himself was supremely manifested in the blood and tissue and skin of Jesus...that this man died for us...rose again, ascended...and now works His saving work for us, hour by hour. Mark records how a man once in an offhand way addressed the Lord Jesus as " good master" . The Lord's response was to say that if the man *really* accepted Him as 'good' he ought to share His cross, and sell what he had and give to the poor. The real extent of Jesus' goodness and the simple fact that Jesus never sinned will move us to deep personal response, if we truly perceive it.

Inspiration To Not Sin

The fact that the Lord Jesus was human and yet was perfect is a huge challenge to our spiritual endeavours. No longer can we merely blame our natures for our imperfection. Ted Spongberg developed the logic of this point in his various writings (1). Rudolf Rijkeboer sums it up: "Adam sinned and died. But... it was not inevitable that his son or his later descendants would fail likewise" (2).

(1) See, e.g., E.M. Spongberg, *From Faith To Faith* (Peakhurst, NSW, Australia: 2001).

(2) Rudolf Rijkeboer, *Jesus' Last Message* (Voorburg, Holland: De Broeders In Christus, 1998) p. 38.

2.24 Jesus is the Christ

Preaching Him

If we deny Christ, we deny that Jesus is the Christ (1 Jn. 2:22); and yet we deny Jesus is the Christ if we don't preach Him (Mt. 10:33). It follows that if we really believe that Jesus was not just Jesus of Nazareth but the Christ of God, therefore we won't deny Him but will preach

Him. This is why there is connection between confessing Jesus as Christ and preaching Him (Jn. 9:22; Acts 18:5; Phil. 2:11). The reference in Phil. 2:10,11 to every knee bowing and every tongue confessing the Lordship of Jesus is perhaps a reference back to the great commission to take Him to all peoples. That day when every knee would bow to the Lord Jesus will be the result of the outcome of His exaltation. A grasp of who the Lord Jesus really is and the height of His present exaltation will naturally result in a confession of Him to the world, as well as a deep personal obedience to His word and will (Heb. 2:1). " But and if ye should suffer for righteousness sake...fear not their fear, neither be troubled; but sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord: being ready always to give answer to every man" (1 Pet. 3:14). *Knowing and having* Jesus the Christ as Lord of our hearts will practically enable us to overcome tribulation, and will lead to a suitably humble witness in response. The Gospel is " the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4 RSV). 2 Cor. 2:14-17 invites us to see the Lord Jesus after His victory- which can only refer to His victorious death on the cross- leading a victory parade, in which we are the triumphant soldiers, carrying with us burning incense. This represents our preaching of the Gospel, as part of our participation in the joyful glory of the Lord's victory on the cross. And yet that incense is used as a double symbol- both of us the preachers, who hold the aroma, and yet we are also the aroma itself. We are the witness. But the motivation for it all is our part in the victory procession of the Lord, going on as it does down through the ages, as He as it were comes home from the cross.

Generosity

Mary anointed the Lord's head (Mt. 26:6) in order to reflect her belief that Jesus really was the Christ, the anointed one. She gave her life savings for this belief. It can be apparently painless to believe that Jesus is the Christ, and yet the implications of accepting this simple fact can transform a life.

2.25 The Lord Jesus died and rose again, and was made Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36), now mediating for us in Heaven.

The N.T. implies that to accept Jesus as Lord is the essence of the Gospel. In this sense, whoever confesses Jesus as Lord will be saved (Rom. 10:9, 13)- but to confess Jesus as Lord means a radical surrender of every part of our lives. It doesn't merely refer to mouthing the words " Jesus is Lord" . Paul found that every hour of his life, he was motivated to endure by Christ's resurrection (1 Cor. 15:30); this was how deep was his practical awareness of the power of that most basic fact. The Lord Jesus presents Himself to us as "the comforter", the *parakletos*. But *parakletos* means not only a comforter, one who speaks to the heart; but also the word carries the idea of an intercessor. The related word *paraklesis* is translated 'entreaty' (2 Cor. 8:4,17). So what's the conclusion? The Lord's intercession for us should be understood by us as a heart warming comfort. That the Lord is our mediator is a comfort- if we reflect upon it enough.

Hope

The Lord's resurrection is the basis for ours. Despite the emotion and hardness of death itself, our belief in resurrection is rooted in our faith that our Lord died and rose. When comforting those who had lost loved ones in the Lord, Paul doesn't simply remind them of the doctrine of the resurrection at the Lord's coming. His focus instead is on the fact that " if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him" (1 Thess. 4:14). The reality of the resurrection must mean something to us in the times of death

which we face in life. Jesus and the New Testament writers seem to me to have a startling disregard of death. Paul says that Jesus has "abolished death" (2 Tim. 1:10) in that death as the world has to face it, final and total death, does not happen to us in Christ. This is why those who truly follow the Lord will never taste of death (Jn. 8:51,52); everyone who lives and believes in Him shall never die (Jn. 11:26). It really is but a sleep. I know the hard reality of the loss still hurts, still registers. But in the end, because He abolished death in Himself, so has He done already for all those in Him.

Living For Others

The fact Jesus is Lord has vital practical import for us. In Rom. 14:7-9, Paul speaks of the need not to live unto ourselves, but to rather live in a way which is sensitive to the conscience and needs of others. Why? "For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that He [Jesus] might be Lord both of the dead and living". Because He is our Lord we therefore don't live for ourselves, but for Christ our Lord and all those in Him. Jesus becomes an authority figure for us, because He is indeed Lord and Christ. This may sound obvious, but the blessings and implications of it become more apparent when we reflect how haphazard are the lives of those who have no such personal authority in their experience. They are so aimless, so easily distracted, so self-centred, because they have no sense of obligation to a Lord and Master as we have. Personal feelings of like and dislike are the only authority they have to recognize, and thus their hedonism is so haphazard in its nature. Yet for those who truly accept Jesus as personal Lord, there is a structure and purpose and order in human life which will essentially be continued in the eternal ages of the Kingdom.

If we "believe the name of...Jesus Christ", then we will love one another (1 Jn. 3:23 RVmg.). To believe the name and to love each other are "his commandment" - singular. They are one and the same thing. This is how direct is the link between truly believing in the name of Jesus, and loving each other. One cannot truly believe in Him, in all that He was, all that He stood and died for, and all that He is...and not articulate this in some form of love for the brotherhood.

Quitting The Life Of The Flesh

When Paul exalts that Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, dwelling in light which no man can approach unto, this isn't just some literary flourish. It is embedded within a context of telling the believers to quit materialism, indeed to flee from its snare. 1 Tim. 6:6-14 concern this; and then there is the passage about Christ's exaltation (:15,16), and then a continued plea to share riches rather than build them up (:17-19). Because He is Lord of all, we should quit our materialism and sense of self-ownership. For we are His, and all we have is for His service too. And the principle of His being Lord affects every aspect of our spirituality. Dennis Gillet truly observed: "Mastery is gained by crowning the Master as Lord and King" ⁽¹⁾. And Peter likewise says that those who reject the Lordship of Jesus (2 Pet. 2:10) indulge in sexual immorality. The height of His Lordship ought to mean self-control in our lives; because He, rather than our own passions, is the Lord and Master of our soul. Joseph's amazing exaltation in Egypt was clearly typical of that of the Lord after His resurrection. As a result of Joseph's exaltation, no man could lift up even his hand or foot without except within the sphere of Joseph's power. And the Lord's exaltation has the same effect and imperative over us. Jude 4 parallels rejecting Jesus as Master and Lord with rejecting His moral demands. If He truly is Lord and Master, we simply won't live the immoral life which Jude criticizes.

It makes an interesting study to analyze the areas of Paul's writing where he makes most intense use of the title "Lord" for Jesus. One such passage is in 1 Cor. 6:12- 7:40, where Paul addresses issues relating to sexual self-control. Here the density of usage of the title "Lord" is higher than anywhere else in his writings. And he wasn't merely playing with words- the idea clearly is that the Lordship of Jesus is to have a gripping practical effect upon our lives.

Humility

Because Jesus is Lord and Master, and because He is our representative in every way, therefore all that He did and was becomes an imperative for us to follow. Thus: " If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn. 13:13,14). They called Him " Lord and Master" , but *wouldn't* wash each other's feet. Like us so often, they had the right doctrinal knowledge, but it meant nothing to them in practice. To know Him as Lord is to wash each others' feet, naked but for a loincloth, with all the subtle anticipations of the cross which there are in this incident. " Wherefore [because of the exaltation of Jesus] [be obedient and] work out your own salvation with fear and trembling [i.e. in humility]" (Phil. 2:12). And so it is with appreciating God's greatness; the deeper our realization of it, the higher our response. Thus Solomon built a " great" house for Yahweh, " for great is our God above all gods" (2 Chron. 2:5). Israel prayed to God but without meaning, " though they called them to the most High, none at all would exalt him" (Hos. 11:7). They theoretically knew Him as " the most High" but in their hearts they failed to exalt Him. And so their prayers remained as empty words.

James 2:1 (Gk.) gives the Lord Jesus the title of " the glory" (as also in Lk. 2:32; Eph. 1:17). And James makes the point that we cannot believe that Jesus is Lord, in the Lord Jesus as the Lord of glory and have respect of persons. This may seem a strange connection at first sight. But perhaps the sense is that if we see the *height* and surpassing extent of *His* glory, all others will pale into insignificance, and therefore we will be biased for or against nobody and nothing because of the way they are all as nothing before the brightness of the glory of the Lord we follow. The RVmg. makes the point clearer: " Do ye, in accepting persons, hold the faith of the Lord of glory?" . This explains why when Paul sat down to write to ecclesias troubled with worldliness, immorality and false doctrine, he takes as his repeated opening theme the greatness and exaltation of the Lord Jesus.

There's one more especially noteworthy thing which the sheer *height* of the Lord's exaltation leads us to. " Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...wherefore...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:9-12). These words are alluding to Is. 45:23,24: " ...unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear. Surely, shall one say, in the Lord have I righteousness and strength" . We all find humility difficult. But before the height of His exaltation, a height which came as a result of the depth of the degradation of the cross, we should bow our knees in an unfeigned humility and realization of our sinfulness, and thankful recognition of the fact that through Him we are counted righteous. We will be prostrated in the day of judgment before Him, and yet will be made to stand. We therefore ought not to judge our brother who will likewise be made to stand in that day- to his Master he stands or falls, not to us.

Unity

Those who make divisions don't serve "our Lord Christ" (Rom. 16:17,18 RV); if they saw Christ's Lordship, they wouldn't be divisive, but be humbled into loving co-operation with His brethren. 1 Corinthians contains many warnings against being "puffed up" (1 Cor. 4:6,8,19; 5:2,6; 13:4). These warnings often come in the context of the sacrifice of Jesus, the Passover lamb. The fact He died as He did means that we must live Passover lives without the leaven of pride and being puffed up about leading brethren etc. Perceiving *His* greatness will mean that we will not seek to follow men. Phil. 2:1-11 is a hymn of praise to Jesus, exalting in His present high status. But it has a context. The context is an appeal to unity and self abnegation in the service of others. This is what a grasp of His exaltation should lead to. This passage should not just be 'a difficult passage' to explain to others. Let us see the real import of it for us.

Separation From The World

As with many aspects of doctrine, it is often difficult for us to appreciate how radically revolutionary they were in the first century context; and in essence they should lose none of their radicalness with us. David Bosch observes⁽²⁾: "Christians confessed Jesus as Lord of all lords- the most revolutionary political demonstration imaginable in the Roman Empire" . Philip Yancey likewise⁽³⁾: "As the church spread throughout the Roman empire, its followers took up the slogan "Christ is Lord" , a direct affront to Roman authorities who required all citizens to take the oath 'Caesar [the state] is Lord'" . It hurt, it cost, to recognize Him as Lord. And so it should with us. Men and women died for this; and we likewise give our lives in response to that very same knowledge. There is a tendency, which the Lord Himself brought to our attention, of calling Him Lord but not doing what He says. To know Him as Lord in truth is axiomatically to be obedient to Him (Lk. 6:46). The reality of the Lordship of Jesus is used in Revelation (19:12, 16) to encourage the brethren to continue fearless in their witness despite persecution. Jesus is Lord of the kings of the earth; He has control over the world; therefore, no human power can harm us without His express permission and purpose. The exhortation of Ps. 110 is powerful: because Jesus is now seated at the Father's right hand, His people offer themselves as freewill offerings in this, the day of His power. They are arrayed in "holy attire" because *He* has been made the Priest after the order of Melchizedek- they share in the work which His exaltation has enabled (Ps. 110:1,3,4 RVmg.).

Col. 2:8,9 reasons that because in Christ dwells all the fullness of God, so far is He exalted, that we therefore should not follow *men*. A man or woman who is truly awed by the height of the Lord's exaltation simply will not allow themselves to get caught up in personality cults based around individuals, even if they are within the brotherhood.

Faith

Faith is also inculcated by an appreciation of the height of His exaltation. He now has all power in Heaven and in earth, and this in itself should inspire us with faith in prayer and hope in His coming salvation. On the basis of passages like Ex. 4:7; Num. 12:10-15; 2 Kings 5:7,8, "leprosy was regarded as a "stroke" only to be removed by the Divine hand which had imposed it" ⁽⁴⁾. The leper of Mk. 1:40 lived with this understanding, and yet he saw in Jesus nothing less than God manifest. Inspired by the height of the position which he gave Jesus in his heart, he could ask him in faith for a cure: "If thou wilt, *thou canst* [as only God was understood to be able to] make me clean" .

Love For Jesus

We believe Jesus rose and ascended. We believe Jesus is Lord. Having not seen Him, we love Him. Because He is not now physically with us, our connection with Him is not through our physical senses. It is, therefore, through our inward application of Biblical material to our minds and hearts. We read the Gospel records and epistles, we study the Law, seeking to reconstruct who He really was and is, with a verve which is generated by the simple reality of the fact that He is not physically with us. And as we do this over the years, we will have the actual sense of being confronted, claimed, taught, restored, upheld and empowered by the Jesus of the Gospels. As C.S. Lewis observed: " It is the sense that in the Gospels [we] have met a personality...so strong is the flavour of that personality that, even when he says that which [on the lips of any other man] would be appallingly arrogant, yet we accept him at his own valuation when he says 'I am meek and lowly of heart'" [\(5\)](#).

Preaching Him

Because Christ is Lord of all, we must preach Him to all, even if like Peter we would rather not preach to them. This was the motivational power and reality of Christ's universal Lordship for Peter (Acts 10:36). The same link between Christ's Lordship and witness is found in Phil. 2:10 and 1 Pet. 3:15 (which alludes Is. 8:13- Yahweh of Hosts, of many ones, becomes manifest now in the Lord Jesus). The ascended Christ was highly exalted and given the Name above every Name, so that for those who believed this, they would bow in service at the Name of Jesus. Peter preached in and about the name of Jesus- this is emphasized (Acts 2:31,38; 3:6,16; 4:10,12,17,18,30; 5:28,40,41; 10:43). The excellence of knowing Him and His character and the wonder of the exalted Name given on His ascension (Phil. 2:9; Rev. 3:12) lead Peter to witness. Because of His exaltation, we confess Jesus as Lord to men, as we later will to God at judgment (Phil. 2:9). According as we confess Him before men, so our judgment will reflect this. Lifting up Jesus as Lord is to be the basis of giving a witness to every man of the hope that lies within us (1 Pet. 3:15 RSV). The knowledge and experience of His exaltation can only be witnessed to; it can't be kept quiet. 3 Jn. 7 refers to how the great preaching commission was obeyed: " For his name's sake they went forth, taking nothing (material help) from the Gentiles" (Gentile believers). For the excellence of knowing His Name they went forth in witness, and moreover were generous spirited, not taking material help to enable this. The knowledge of the Name of itself should inspire to active service: for the sake of the Lord's Name the Ephesians laboured (Rev. 2:3).

Because " all power is given unto me...go ye *therefore* and teach all nations" (Mt. 28:18,19). The great preaching commission is therefore not so much a commandment as an inevitable corollary of the Lord's exaltation. We will not be able to sit passively in the knowledge of the universal extent of His authority / power. We will have to spread the knowledge of it to all. There may be some similarity with the way in which the exaltation of Israel / God's people was so that all men would be witnessed to (Dt. 4:6). Jehu was exalted from amongst his brethren as was Christ (2 Kings 9:2 = Dt. 18:18; Ps. 45:7) and taken up into a chamber within a chamber (AVmg), cp. Heaven itself. There Jehu was anointed, made Lord and Christ, and then the people placed their garments underneath him (v. 13) and proclaimed him to the world as King of Israel. This symbolic incident teaches a clear lesson- the exaltation of Jesus should lead us to be witnesses for Him. The wonder and joy of it alone, that one of us, one of our boys, a man like us...should be *so* exalted.

The greatness of Christ, the simple fact Jesus is Lord, clearly influenced Mark's witness; he began his preachings of the Gospel (of which his Gospel is but a transcript) by quoting Isaiah's words about how a highway was to be prepared " for our God" and applying them to

the Lord Jesus, whom he saw as God manifest in flesh. Appreciating the height of who Jesus was and is, clearly motivated his preaching. And it should ours too. This is why Paul in the face of every discouragement could preach that "there *is* another king, one Jesus" (Acts 17:7). This was the core of his message; not only that there *will be* a coming King in Jerusalem, but that there *is* right now a King at God's right hand, who demands our total allegiance. The Acts record associates the height of Jesus with a call to repentance too. This is the message of Is. 55:6-9- *because* God's thoughts are so far higher than ours, *therefore* call upon the Lord whilst He is near, and let the wicked forsake his way. Because the Father and Son who are so high above us morally and physically are willing to deal with us, *therefore* we ought to seize upon their grace and repent.

Obedience

If we truly know Jesus is Lord, in reality rather than merely in words, then we will actually do the will of the Father (Mt. 7:21,22). To call Jesus 'Lord' and not do anything actual and concrete in response means that our words are empty. It's as simple as that.

Not Being Materialistic

If Jesus is Lord, He owns all. Nothing that we have is our own. The Old Testament stressed that God's ownership of all precludes our own petty materialism, our manic desire to 'own'. Abraham refused to take "from a thread even to a shoelatchet" of what he could justifiably have had for himself; because Yahweh "the most high God [is] possessor of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:22,23). But now, all that power has been bestowed by the Father upon the Son. Our allegiance to the Lord Jesus demands the same resignation of worldly acquisition as Abraham showed.

Control Of Our Words

Those who do not accept the Lordship of God [or of Jesus] will have no reason to control their words: "Who have said, With our tongue will we prevail; our lips are our own: who is lord over us?" (Ps. 12:4). But the opposite is true; a realize of the tightness of Christ's Lordship over us results in a control of our words, knowing that our tongue and lips are not our own but His.

The Cost Of It

Given all these things, it deeply costs us to accept Jesus as Lord. Yet for so many moments of each day, we deny Him His Lordship in practice. In the first century, accepting Jesus as Lord was a life and death issue. Pliny wrote to Trajan how accused Christians had to both say "The emperor is Lord" and also curse Christ. Polycarp was urged by a Roman official to submit: "What harm is there in saying 'Caesar is Lord?'" and yet because he refused, Polycarp was killed (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 8.2). It would seem that there were some Christians who gave in- and even justified it. For 1 Cor. 12:3 warns that "no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is cursed!'", and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit". My suggestion is that this is a reference to Mt. 10:17, which comforts believers that when we are delivered up, "what you are to say will be given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you". It would appear that some of the Christians who gave in were claiming that in accordance with this verse, it was the Spirit of God which had made them say "Jesus is cursed!" and deny that "Jesus is Lord". Paul is

pointing out that this simply doesn't happen. In our context, the point simply is that to constantly affirm "Jesus is Lord" demands an awful lot from us, and as in the first century, so in the twenty first... we will be sorely tempted to think that just a few moments of denial when in a tough situation is quite OK. But in this there is the true test as to whether really we are under His Lordship or not. We have no court to face, no lions to fear. Instead, we have the court of human opinion, the lions of social mockery, financial loss, the human negatives that arise from the unselfish living which Christ's Lordship demands of us.

Notes

- (1) Dennis Gillett, *The Genius Of Discipleship* (Birmingham: CMPA, 1982).
- (2) David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1992).
- (3) Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998) p. 246.
- (4) L.G. Sargent, *The Gospel Of The Son Of God*, (Birmingham: CMPA, 1966) p. 28.
- (5) C.S. Lewis, *Fern-seed and Elephants* (London: Collins, 1975 ed.) p. 110.

2.26 Through the resurrection of Jesus, forgiveness of sins became possible for all men, and we too will be resurrected to life.

Preaching

If we believe in the resurrection of Jesus, we will preach it world-wide. He died and rose as the representative of all men; and therefore this good news should be preached to all kinds and all races of people. Men from all nations were in prospect sprinkled by His blood (Is. 52:15); and therefore we must extend the knowledge of this to all men, both in our collective and personal witness. Lk. 24:48 simply comments that the disciples were witnesses to the resurrection and the fact that forgiveness and salvation was therefore potentially available to all men. The parallel records in Mt. and Mk. say that they were told to go out and witness to the resurrection world-wide. Putting them together it is apparent that if we are truly witnesses of the resurrection in our own faith, then part and parcel of this is to take this witness out into our own little worlds.

Christ's resurrection is an imperative to preach. When Peter is asked why he continues preaching when it is forbidden, he responds by saying that he is obeying God's command, in that Christ had been raised (Acts 5:29-32). There was no specific command from God to witness (although there was from Christ); from the structure of Peter's argument he is surely saying that the fact God raised Christ is *de facto* a command from God to witness to it which must be obeyed. The resurrection of Jesus is itself the command to preach. Yet reading carefully, Peter says that he is a witness not only of the resurrection, but of the fact that Jesus is now at God's right hand and from that position of power has enabled forgiveness. How could Peter be a witness to *that*? For he hadn't been up to Heaven to check. Quite simply, he knew the extent of his own forgiveness. And so he therefore knew that truly, Jesus had ascended and was there in a position of influence upon Almighty God, to enable forgiveness. His own cleansed conscience was the proof that his belief in the Lord's ascension was belief

in something true. And yet we ask: does our belief that Christ ascended really have this effect upon us?

Because the Lord's resurrection enabled forgiveness of sins (1 Cor. 15:17), Peter therefore on this basis makes an appeal for repentance and appropriation of the Lord's work for men through baptism into His death and resurrection (Acts 2:31-38; 3:15,19 "therefore"). And Paul likewise: "He, whom God raised again...through [on account of] this man [and His resurrection] is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 13:37,38). Because of the Name the Lord has been given, salvation has been enabled (Acts 4:12 cp. Phil. 2:9). "God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities" (Acts 3:26); "the God of our fathers raised up Jesus...exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give (i.e. inspire) repentance to Israel, and forgiveness" (Acts 5:30,31). The fact of the Lord's resurrection has assured forgiveness of sins for all who will identify themselves with it through baptism into Him; and this is why it is thereby an imperative to preach it, if we believe in it. The disciples were told to go and preach of the resurrection of Christ, and *therefore* of the required responses this entails: repentance, acceptance of forgiveness and baptism (Lk. 24:46). Preaching is motivated by His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:14). Baptism saves us "by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 3:21 cp. Rom. 4:25; Col. 2:13).

Confession Of Sin

We who were dead in sins were "quickened together with Christ" (Eph. 2:5). If we believe in Christ Jesus' resurrection, we will therefore repent, confess our sins and know His forgiveness. Thus believing in His raising and making confession of sin are bracketed together in Rom. 10:9,10, as both being essential in gaining salvation. Because He rose, *therefore* we stop committing sin (1 Cor. 6:14). We can't willfully sin if we believe in the forgiveness His resurrection has enabled. Men should repent not only because judgment day is coming, but because God has commended repentance to us, He has offered / inspired faith in His forgiveness *by the resurrection of Christ* (Acts 17:30,31 AV mg.). The empty tomb and all the Lord's glorification means for us should therefore inspire personal repentance; as well as of itself being an imperative to go and share this good news with a sinful world, appealing for them to repent and be baptized so that they too might share in the forgiveness enabled for them by the resurrection. Because the Lord was our representative, in His resurrection we see our own. We are therefore born again unto a living and abounding hope, by our identification with the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:3). The Ethiopian eunuch read of his representative Saviour as also being childless, and being as he was, in the midst of a wilderness; and realizing this, he desired to be baptized into Him. Grasping the representational nature of the Lord's death inspires response in baptism, and yet the motivational power of this fact continues afterwards.

Peter knew Jesus had risen, and he had met him and been "glad" when he saw the Lord, and in some form had joyfully proclaimed the news to the others. But "when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher's coat unto him (for he was naked) and did cast himself into the sea" (Jn. 21:7), and then meets the Lord and as it were they settle the score relating to his denials. Again by a fire, the three fold "lovest thou me?" probed Peter's denials, and the threefold commission to "feed my sheep" confirmed his total re-instatement to grace. The whole flavour of this record would make it seem that this was the first time Peter had met the risen Lord. But it clearly wasn't. Surely the point is that like us, we can know theoretically that Christ rose; we can be sure of it. But the personal implications in terms of confession of

sin and service to that risen Lord can be lost on us, to the point that we *don't really accept* that Christ is risen, even if in theory we do know and confess it.

Labour For Him

Because Christ rose, we have not believed and preached "in vain" (1 Cor. 15:14). Because He rose, therefore "awake to righteousness and sin not" (15:34)- for He is our representative. We labour for Him because our faith in His resurrection is not "in vain". Our faith in His resurrection is not in vain (:2,14), and our labour is therefore not in vain (:58) because it is motivated by His rising again. The grace of being able to believe in the resurrection of Jesus meant that Paul "laboured abundantly" (:10). And he can therefore bid us follow his example- of labouring abundantly motivated by the same belief that the Lord rose (:58). Paul exhorts that prayers be made "for all men", just because "Christ Jesus gave himself a ransom for all", and He thereby is the one and only mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:1-6). Because of what He enabled for all, we should pray for all, that somehow circumstances might be allowed which enable all men's salvation in Jesus to indeed spread to all men.

Forgiving Others

Atonement means 'covering'. Because God covers our sins, we ought to cover those of others. The simple statement "love covereth all sins" (Prov. 10:12) comes in the context of appealing for God's people not to gossip about each others' failures. And the passage is most definitely applied to us in the NT (1 Pet. 4:8; James 5:20; 1 Cor. 13:7RVmg. "love covereth all things"). "He that goeth about as a talebearer revealeth secrets; but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter" (Prov. 11:13). Our natural delight in telling or brooding on the moral failures of others, as if life is one long soap opera, will be overcome if we have personally felt the atonement; the covering of our sins. "He that covereth his [own] sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Prov. 28:13). The opposition is between owning up to our sins, and trying to cover them for ourselves. If we believe in the covering work of God in Christ, then we will own up to our sins the more easily, confident in His atonement.

Use Our Bodies Properly

The classic chapter about the resurrection of body, 1 Cor. 15, is also about the resurrection of Jesus. And it is not just a doctrinal treatise which Paul throws in to his letter to the Corinthians. It must be viewed in the context of the entire letter. He has been talking about the correct use of the body- not abusing it, defiling it, in whatever way. And he has spoken specifically about sexual issues. And then in summary, at the end of his letter, he speaks at such length about the resurrection of the body. Seeing that God intends resurrecting our body, our body means so much to Him that Christ died and rose again to enable our bodily resurrection, therefore it matters a lot what we do with our body right now!

Generosity

The parable of the rich man and the poor beggar Lazarus surely carried with it the message that we ought to be generous to the poor; and that there is a need to do this in view of the judgment to come and sense of the future we may miss because of our selfishness in this life. The condemned rich man wanted to warn others of the need to be generous to the poor so that

they would not be condemned. The Lord's comment was that it was His resurrection from the dead which was intended to "persuade" people of this (Lk. 16:31). Accepting the import of His resurrection therefore should result in our being "persuaded" towards a life of generosity to the marginal- just, of course, as the Lord's death and resurrection was God's grace to us, the marginal beggars in spiritual terms.

The resurrection of Christ thus "interrogates our conscience" in all these areas of life (1 Pet. 3:21 RVmg.). We can't be passive to it; it's not painless to believe.

2.27 The Lord's blood was shed for our redemption. Christ died for us as our representative.

The very fact that the Lord Jesus was and is our representative has colossal implications for the meaning of our human life. Very few people really know how to live, what to live for, what aims to set, what goals to go for. They assume that accumulation of wealth, fame and human pleasure are the obvious things to be sought after, because that's what everyone else goes for. But clearly enough, these are misplaced ideals. Once we grasp that the Lord Jesus is our representative, we have an aim. He died not to save us from dying, but to show us how to die, for what to die, and how to so magnificently live life again to the glory of God. Only by knowing who Christ is can we know who we are. People struggle, for the most part, to find their true identity. "Who really am I, who should I be...?" Are tragically unanswered questions for so many. People become depersonalized in the modern workplace and society generally; the common complaint "I've got no time!" seems to me so often reflective of the fact that people have no time for their real selves. The value and meaning of the human person has become devalued in the internet generation more than ever before. This is where it becomes so important to latch on to the Lord Jesus as our representative, standing as He does, towering above men, as the ideal humanity who represents us, what we can and shall one day become, and whose very existence as our representative beckons us to aspire to so much more than the petty dreams of mediocre human life. Christ as our representative means that He is the representative of the church as a whole, the entire body of persons who are "in Christ", we each have some unique contribution to His body upon earth. This is why He suffered *so* much- so that He found a fellow feeling true with every tempted mind which is in Him. In society and the workplace, nobody is irreplaceable, no cog can somehow not be replicated albeit in a slightly different form. But the part we have to play in Him is unique and in one sense irreplaceable by anyone else. He has been highly exalted and given a name *huper* every name, that each of us should bow our knees before Him (Phil. 2:9). *Huper* here is usually translated "above", but perhaps the idea is rather that through His representative sufferings, the Lord has now a Name *for* every one of our names / personalities / histories / characters. He tasted death *for* every man (Heb. 2:9), and we are therefore to be *for* Him and all that are in Him. His whole suffering *for* us was to leave us an example, that we should follow in His steps to the cross (1 Pet. 2:21). Forasmuch as He suffered *for* us, we are to arm ourselves likewise with that same mind (1 Pet. 4:1- this is repeating the teaching and reasoning of Phil. 2, that we should have the same mind in us which was in Jesus at the time of His death). As He laid down His life *for* us, so we should lay down our lives *for* our brethren (1 Jn. 3:16)- in all the myriad of large and small sacrifices this requires, from phone calls through thoughtful comments and cash generosity to literal death *huper* others if that's what's required. His whole priestly, reconciliatory work is to be ours. Not that *we* are Saviours of the world in ourselves, but we are to do this work *huper* Him and *huper* this world.

We see in the events surrounding the death of Lazarus an exquisite essay in the representative nature of the Lord Jesus. "Jesus wept" (Jn. 11:35) in response to how Jesus had seen His beloved friends weeping (Jn. 11:33). He was "troubled" (Jn. 11:33), the same word being used about the troubling of His soul in prayer to the Father in Gethsemane (Jn. 12:27; 13:21) and also on the cross in prayer for us there (Heb. 5:5). Yet this is the word used in Rom. 8:26 about His intercession for us *now*. Just as He absorbed the pain of His people as He stood outside the tomb of Lazarus, weeping with them and therefore groaning in internal prayer to the Father for them- so it is today. His representation of us isn't merely mechanical, an on-paper piece of theology. It involves an absorption on His part of our situations, our pain, and a representation of these before God.

A Pattern For Our Death

All that is true of the Lord Jesus becomes in some sense, at some time, true of each of us who are in Him. It's true that nowhere in the Bible is the Lord Jesus actually called our "representative", but the idea is clearly there. I suggest it's especially clear in all the Bible passages which speak of Him acting *huper* us- what Dorothee Sölle called "the preposition of representation" (1). Arndt and Gingrich in their Greek-English Lexicon define *huper* in the genitive as meaning "'for', 'in behalf of', 'for the sake of' someone. When used in the sense of representation, *huper* is associated with verbs like 'request, pray, care, work, feel, suffer, die, support'" (2). So in the same way as the Lord representatively prays, died, cares, suffers, works "for" us, we are to do likewise, if He indeed is our representative and we His. Our prayers for another, our caring for them, is no longer a rushed salving of our conscience through some good deed. Instead 2 Cor. 5:15 becomes our motivation: "He died for (*huper*) all [of us], that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for (*huper*) them". We are, in our turn, to go forth and be "ambassadors for (*huper*) Christ... we pray you in Christ's stead (*huper* Christ), be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). Grasping Him as our representative means that we will be His representatives in this world, and not leave that to others or think that our relationship in Him is so internal we needn't breathe nor show a word of it to others. As He suffered "the just for (*huper*) the unjust" (1 Pet. 3:18), our living, caring, praying for others is no longer done "for" those whom we consider good enough, worthy enough, sharing our religious convictions and theology. For whilst we were yet sinners, Christ died *huper* us (Rom. 5:6). And this representative death is to find an issue in our praying *huper* others (Acts 12:5; Rom. 10:1; 15:30; 2 Cor. 1:11), just as He makes intercession *huper* us (Rom. 8:26,34). We are to spend and be spent *huper* others, after the pattern of the Lord in His final nakedness of death on the cross (2 Cor. 12:15). These must all be far more than fine ideas for us. These are the principles which we are to live by in hour by hour life. And they demand a huge amount, even the cross itself. For unto us is given "in the behalf of Christ [*huper* Christ], not only to [quietly, painlessly, theoretically] believe on Him, but also to suffer for (*huper*) his sake" (Phil. 1:29). In all this, then, we see that the Lord's being our representative was not only at the time of His death; the fact He continues to be our representative makes Him our ongoing challenge.

The Error Of Substitution

The substitutionary approach regards us as somebody useless, unable to do a job, incapable, for whom a Divine substitute had to be called on to replace. But we're not replaceable, substitutable pawns in God's chess game. We are invited to be Him for this world, for those with whom we intersect. Strangely enough, the mind of Dietrich Bonhoeffer was much exercised by the difference between substitution and representation as he endured his sufferings at the hands of the Nazis in the second world war, and especially as he came to

face up to his inevitable execution at their hands. He wrote much of how accepting our representative role, patterned after Christ's representatory work and being for us, brings a huge responsibility upon us. And so he mused: "No man can altogether escape responsibility, and this means that no man can avoid representation. Even the solitary [in a Nazi prison cell, we may interject] lives as a representative... for his life is lived representatively for man as man, for mankind as a whole" (3). A man thinks clearly when facing death for the principles upon which he has lived his life. And I find it encouraging that Bonhoeffer's mind at this time took comfort from the power of this basic doctrine- that Christ is our representative. As by response we are to be both *His* representative and the representative of our fellow man, we have a debt, a responsibility, to the entire world to identify with them and lead them to God through Christ. In this sense, because we individually are unique, we are irreplaceable in our manifestation / representation of Christ. We were not replaced or substituted, we are represented and thereby and therefore we must represent Him in this world.

Our witness to others is to be based around our identification with them. Teaching these days isn't teacher-centred; it's impersonal, often relying upon online resources. The teaching act is now performed without the need for the teacher to identify with the pupils. To quote Dorothee Sölle again- and she has plumbed the depths of this theme of representation more than any other I know- "Being a teacher does not simply mean teaching this or that subject, it means self-identification" (4). Our teaching of the Gospel shouldn't rely too heavily upon media- printed books, websites etc. It's about us and them, you teaching me eye to eye, me explaining to you face to face. All the truly successful preachers of the Gospel whom I've known have been characterized by this direct approach. For our witness to others is part of our playing our part in the Lord's representative work and sacrifice, a living out of His death and rising again in new life for this world. His self-giving, His surrender of Himself without remainder, is the pattern for our witness. And cold words on white paper or a screen aren't at all the same thing. The Lord Jesus 'came down' from Heaven to earth in symbolic terms; He who was rich became poor for our sakes, His whole existence was *for*, *hyper*, others, to the glory of God. And so must ours be, if we really accept Him as our representative.

Looking For Christ's Return

If we understand something of the 'mechanics' of the atonement, and graspsomething of the fact that they were outworked in a real, historical man, we will see that the final realization of the redemption achieved at the cross will be when Christ comes back. Having expounded the Lord's cross for several chapters, Paul concludes: " So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for Him shall He appear the second time without sin unto salvation" (Heb. 9:28). Here we see two fundamental first principles linked: If we understand something of the atonement, we will earnestly look for the second coming, when the redemption achieved on the cross will be brought unto us (cp. 1 Pet. 1:13). An enthusiasm for the second coming, spurred by a realization that the bringing of salvation then is an outworking of the cross, the implication of the simple fact Christ died for us, will lead to a loose hold on the things of this life.

Preaching

Paul had a debt to preach to all men (Rom. 1:14). But a debt implies he had been given something; and it was not from " all men" , but rather from Christ. Because the Lord gave us the riches of His self-sacrifice, because Christ died for us, we thereby are indebted *to Him*;

and yet this debt has been transmuted into a debt to preach to all humanity. Our obligation to the Lord for His death for us issues in an obligation to preach that message to others.

Consider the implications of 2 Cor. 5:20: " On behalf of Christ, as though God were entreating by us: we beseech you on behalf of Christ: be ye reconciled to God [because] him who knew no sin he made to be a sin [a sin offering?] on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in him" . *Because* of the cross, because Christ died for us, because of the atonement which God wrought in Christ's offering, we beseech men to be reconciled to God. Appreciating the cross and the nature of the atonement should be the basis of our appeal to men. And indeed, such an appeal is *God* appealing to men and women, in that there on the cross " God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself" . The blood and spittle covered body of the Lord lifted up was and is the appeal, the *beseeking* of God Himself to men. And this is the message that we are honoured to preach on His behalf; we preach the appeal of God through the cross.

The reality of the Lord's crucifixion was the basis of Peter's appeal for men to repent: " Repent ye therefore [and he spoke not only to those who had crucified the Lord], and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:17-19). And think through the reasoning of 1 Cor. 1:13: " Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?" . The fact Jesus died and was crucified for us means that we should be baptized into that Name, and also be undivided.

Throughout the NT, there is a clear link between the preaching of the cross, and men and women being converted. There is a power of conversion in the image and message of Christ crucified as our representative. Man cannot remain passive before this. Baptism is an appropriation of His death and resurrection to ourselves. This is why the response to the preaching of the cross in the 1st century was baptism. And the response doesn't stop there; it continues, in the living of the life of the risen Jesus in our lives after baptism: " For the death that he died, he died unto sin...the life that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Even so reckon ye also yourselves to dead unto sin but alive unto God [because you are] in Christ [by baptism into Him]" (Rom. 6:10,11 RV). The death Christ died for us, the life He lives, are all imperatives to us now. Some were tortured "not accepting redemption" (Heb. 11) ; by implication they accepted the true redemption of the blood of Christ rather than the pseudo-redemption offered by this world. Again, the redeeming work of Christ is what fortifies men against the fake Kingdom and redemption of the anti-Christ anti-Kingdom of this world.

The Truth of the Gospel of the cross is the only way to come to salvation. All other religions apart from true Christianity will not give salvation nor a relationship with God. Realising this, David pleads with his people to be a missionary nation: " Give thanks unto Yahweh, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the people...for great is Yahweh, and greatly to be praised: he also is to be feared above all gods. *For* all the gods of the people are idols; but Yahweh made the heavens" (1 Chron. 15:8,25,26). The more we realize the pathetic fallacy of human religion, indeed the whole and utter vanity of life under this sun, the more we will preach Yahweh's Truth to a tragically wandering, aimless world.

Loving Our Partner

Therefore, " husbands love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it...so ought men to love their wives" (Eph. 5:25). The Greek for " gave himself" is mainly used of the Lord Jesus giving up the spirit to the Father. We have shown elsewhere that His

death was as an act of the will, He gave up His life rather than it being taken away from Him. This matchless peak of self-control and self-giving for us must somehow be replicated in the humdrum of daily domestic relationships. He carried our sins " *that* we, being dead to sin, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes (Gk. Wheals- Peter saw them) ye were healed" (1 Pet. 2:24). The husband should love his wife, " even as Christ also the church; because we are members of his body" (Eph. 5:30 RV). Jesus loved us as much as He loves Himself; He " cannot be separated from the work which He came to do" (R.R.). He saved Himself so as to save us. And this isn't just atonement theology- this is to be lived out in married life. As Christ died for us and gave up His last breath for us, so as a supreme act of the will, the husband must give up his life for his woman. And she can only but respond to this. These are high ideals. But the very height of them can transform human life in practice.

Service To God

Romans 6 compares baptism to a change of masters. The point has been made that this is a reference to manumission, whereby a 'redeemer' gave a 'ransom' to a god, which meant that a slave was freed from his master and became a free man, although he was counted as a slave to the god to whom the redeemer had paid the ransom. Indeed, *lutron*, one of the words translated " ransom" with regard to the blood of Christ, has this specific meaning. Deissmann comments: " When anybody heard the Greek word *lutron*, " ransom" , in the first century, it was natural for him to think of the purchase money for manumitting slaves" ⁽⁵⁾. This means that when we come to understand the atonement, we understand that the price has been paid to free us from slavery into the service of God. We are in the position of a slave who suddenly discovers some gracious benefactor has made the longed for payment of ransom. And so he goes free, but is willingly and eagerly in slavery to the god to whom his redeemer had paid the price. In our case this is none other than the One, Almighty God of Israel. And the ransom is the precious blood of Christ, which thereby compells our willing slavery to the new Master. There are other references to manumission in Gal. 5:1,13 RV: " For freedom did Christ set us free...ye have been called unto freedom" and in the references to our being bought with a price, i.e. the blood of Jesus (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23). And this is the horror of 2 Pet. 2:1- " denying even the Master that bought them [out]" . To turn against their gracious redeemer was the ultimate sick act for a slave freed through manumission. And this is the horror of turning away from the Lord. The death of Christ for us is thereby a warning to us of the end of sin and therefore the need to change.

The death of the covenant victim was to act as a warning for what would happen to those who broke the covenant. Thus " The men who transgressed my covenant...I will make like the calf which they cut in two" (Jer. 34:18 RSV). In the account of a Babylonian covenant it was written: " This head is not just the head of the goat...it is the head of Mati'ilu...If Mati'ilu breaks the oath, then as the head of this goat is cut off...so shall the head of Mati'ilu be cut off" ⁽⁶⁾. Thus the dead animal was seen as a representative of the person who entered the covenant. The death of our Lord, therefore, serves as a reminder to us of the end for sin. We either put sin to death, or we must be put to death for it. Gal. 3:15; Heb. 9:16 and other passages liken the blood of Christ to a covenant; and yet the Greek word used means definitely the last will and testament of a dead man. His blood is therefore an imperative to us to do something; it is His will to us, which we must execute. Thus His death, His blood, which is also a symbol of His life, becomes the imperative to us for our lives and living in this world. Note how blood is a symbol of both life and also death (Gen. 37:26; Num. 35:19,33; Lev. 20:9). Both His death and His life form a covenant / testament / will for us to

obey- in both baptism and then in living out the death and life in our daily experience. We cannot be passive to it.

Loving Our Brethren

Exactly because Christ died for us, because the ecclesia has been purchased with the Lord's blood, we are to seek to feed it and not draw men away after ourselves (Acts 20:28,29). This means that the fact Jesus died to redeem the whole ecclesia should lead us to value and care for those whom He has redeemed.

Self Examination

We are only forgiven our sins through the blood of Jesus. Yet in the real life events of sin, the tendency is to allow the fact we forget about sin to achieve a kind of pseudo-atonement; we tell ourselves it's all really OK, we forget about the sin. But this is to actually turn our back on the Lord's blood, and to assume that *we* are the ones who have made atonement. The Hebrew text of Prov. 30:20 provides insight here- the sinful woman has a mouth that 'blots out' [AV "wipeth"- but the Hebrew word is always used about 'blotting out' sin] and says "I have done no wickedness". Our mouths, our self-talk, our self-persuasion, cannot atone for sin. A very deep belief that *only* the blood of Christ who died for us can atone for sin will lead us to a more ready confession of our sin.

Dying With Jesus Day By Day

In baptism we died with Christ. We share His death. His death was representative of us, and we seek to be His faithful representatives in our turn in this world. But what do these phrases mean? Unless we know Jesus as a person, until we have realistically tried to reconstruct how He was, who He is, and what happened physically and concretely in His death, those phrases will remain mere abstract theology. It's been observed, and you and I know it to be true, that each of us dies a little in the death of those we love. You drove home from that funeral never quite the same, and she or he lives and dies with you or me over and over through the years. The richer our relationships, the more effort we've put into them, the deeper and richer this sense will be; for it is, in the end, an enriching experience. Again I say it, that each of us dies a little in the death of those we love. This, I suppose, is the only way in which we who haven't yet died have some personal experience of death and can share in it. And it's the only way my restless mind can grapple with what it means to me, to die with Jesus. If we know Jesus as a person, the recollection and attempted reconstruction in our minds of His death- and His death for us moreover- will have the same effect. In His death, we die. This is the teaching of Romans 6, the chapter read at our baptism probably, and so little understood by us then. We are not only baptized into His death, we live out that death day by day, as we do likewise in the death of those whom we knew and loved, and whom we still know and love insofar as like Jesus, they live in our hearts and inner consciousness.

Notes

- (1) Dorothee Sölle, *Christ The Representative* (London: S.C.M., 1967) p. 69.
- (2) W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon Of The New Testament* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1957).

(3) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London: Fontana, 1964) p. 224.

(4) Dorothee Sölle, *Christ The Representative* (London: S.C.M., 1967) p. 117.

(5) Adolf Deissmann, *Light From The Ancient East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) p. 323. C.K. Barrett in *The New Testament Background* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989) p. 52 agrees with this.

(6) A. Jeremias, *The Old Testament In The Light Of The Ancient East* (New York: Putnam's, 1911), Vol. 2 p. 49.

2.28 Because of the suffering entailed in the putting to death of our sins by the Lord's cross, we should respond in likewise mortifying them and living like Jesus.

Generosity

To put it mildly, our experience of His death for us should lead us to be generous spirited in all ways. In appealing for financial generosity to poorer brethren, Paul sought to inspire the Corinthians with the picture of Christ crucified: " For ye know the grace [gift / giving] of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor [Gk. a pauper], that ye through his poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). In the light of this, we should not just be generous from the abundance of what we have; we should become as paupers in our giving. By this I don't mean we should get to the position where there are no rich people amongst us- this is clearly not the ecclesial scene imagined in passages like 1 Tim. 6. But the image of the pauper is the one that is impressed upon us. The Lord's giving wasn't financial; it was emotional and spiritual. And so, Paul says, both materially and in these ways, we should likewise respond to our brethren, poorer materially or spiritually than we are. " The very spring of our actions is the love of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:14 Philippians; it " urges us on" , NRSV).

Living Like Jesus

By God's grace, the Lord tasted death *for* (Gk. *huper*) *every man*, as our representative: " in tasting death he should stand for all" (NEB). In His death He experienced the essence of the life-struggle and death of every man. The fact the Lord did this *for us* means that we respond *for Him*. " To you it is given *in the behalf of* (Gk. *huper*) Christ, not only to believe on Him [in theory], but to suffer *for his sake* (Gk. *huper*)" (Phil. 1:29). He suffered *for us* as our representative, and we suffer *for Him* in response. This was and is the two-way imperative of the fact the Lord was our representative. He died *for all* that we should die to self and live *for Him* (2 Cor. 5:14,15). " His own self bare our sins [as our representative] in his own body [note the link " *our sins*" and " his *own* body"] that we being dead to sin, should live unto righteousness" (1 Pet. 2:24,25). We died with Him, there on His cross; and so His resurrection life is now ours. He is totally active for us now; His life now is *for us*, and as we live His life, we should be 100% *for Him* in our living. He gave His life *for us*, and we must lay down our lives *for Him* (1 Jn. 3:16). There are about 130 reference to being " in Christ" in the NT. But if any man is truly in Christ, he is a new creature, and the old things pass away; it must equally be true that " Christ [is] in you" . If we are in Him, He must be in us, in that we live lives around the principle of " what would Jesus do?" . His spirit becomes ours. Because of the nature and extent of His sufferings and experiences, the Lord is able to meaningfully enter into the human experience of us all. Yet we feel so often helpless as we watch the sufferings of others- as we watch their facial features contort, as we listen to their complaints. We are deeply aware of the huge gulf between us and them. We cannot penetrate their suffering- or so we think. Yet the Lord Jesus, on the basis of the extent of His love and the

depth of His experience, *can* make this penetration. And it is not impossible that we ourselves can do far better than we think in achieving deep solidarity with others in their sufferings.

Preaching

2 Cor. 5:14-21 urges us to preach the salvation in Christ to all men, because He died for us, as our representative. He died *for* [the sake of] all (5:14,15), He was made sin *for* our sake (5:21); and therefore we are ambassadors *for* [s.w.] His sake (5:20). Because He was our representative, so we must be His representatives in witnessing Him to the world. This is why the preaching of Acts was consistently motivated by the Lord's death and resurrection for the preachers. Phil. 2 draws out the parallel between the Name of Jesus, in which all the names of those in Him find a part, and the need to confess this in preaching. By baptism into the name of Jesus, men confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. There was and is no other name given under Heaven by which men can be saved; "every name" under the whole Heaven must take on the name of Jesus in baptism. This is why Acts associates His exaltation (Acts 2:33; 5:31) and His new name (Acts 2:21,38; 3:6,16; 4:10,12,18,30; 5:40) with an appeal for men and women to be baptized into that Name. Realizing the meaning of the Name of Jesus and the height of His exaltation meant that they realized how "all men" could have their part in a sacrifice which represented "all men". And thus they were motivated to preach to "all men". And thus Paul's whole preaching ministry was a bearing of the Name of Jesus before the Gentiles (Acts 9:15).

2.29 Human nature / the flesh cannot be atoned for, or a sacrifice offered for it; it must be cut off. We must transform our lives.

Transform Our Lives

So we can't keep living the fleshly life thinking that somehow we will be atoned for. We must at least seek to put to death the flesh; not just get forgiveness for the same sins and carry on doing them. Even if this is in practice our experience, there must be a dominant desire to cut off the flesh and a counting of ourselves as dead to sin. We should do this because Christ bore our sins and by the cross healed our spiritual weakness in prospect; we respond to the death of sin which He achieved by cutting off our flesh (1 Pet. 2:24).

In the light of ten chapters of detailed exposition of the meaning of the blood of Christ, *therefore let us...*, Paul triumphantly drives home (Heb. 10:19-25). And he speaks of how we must transform our lives:

- Let us enter boldly "into the holiest by the blood of Jesus". This is only possible through a deep knowledge of sin forgiven. Our prayer life should be a positive and upbuilding experience: "Let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience". Reflection on the atonement, believing it all, will result in a positive and unashamed faith.

- "Let us hold fast...without wavering". If the belief of the cross is imprinted upon our minds, reflected upon not for a few fleeting minutes on Sundays but often throughout each day, we won't waver. The natural tendency to blow hot and cold in our spiritual endeavours will be vanquished beneath an unceasing wonder at what was achieved. It is only sustained

reflection upon the cross which can, in an almost mystical way, impart an unceasing verve of inspiration.

- " Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together...but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching" . Again the doctrine of the atonement and that of the second coming are linked. As we realize more and more clearly that very soon the final outworking of the cross will be achieved in the actual physical granting of redemption to us, so we will be inspired to more and more earnestly seek the welfare of our brethren. If we believe in the atonement, we will naturally seek to break bread. Whether it means summoning the courage to meet with those we naturally would rather not meet with, bringing the wine to the meeting, we will be motivated to rise up and serve in these ways by the eternal and personal truth of the cross.

As the blood of the ram had to be put on the ear, thumb and toe (Lev. 8:23), so the blood of Christ's atonement should transform and affect every aspect of our lives; our hearing [i.e. our perception], our doing and walking...

2.30 The basis of our salvation is that we are justified, counted righteous, by our faith and baptism into the representative sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. His righteousness is thereby counted to us. Imputed righteousness is the key to salvation.

Throughout Romans, the point is made that the Lord counts as righteous those that believe; righteousness is imputed to us the unrighteous by our faith (Rom. 2:26; 4:3,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,22,23,24; 8:36; 9:8).

The extent of Divine forgiveness and imputed righteousness is hard for us to plumb, because we inevitably tend to compare His forgiveness with the experience we have had of it at the hands of men. God describes a forgiven Israel as 'attaining to innocency' (Hos. 8:5). How can a person convicted of sin ever be pronounced genuinely 'innocent'? Human forgiveness can never achieve that. Only by being clothed in the righteousness of Christ can such a position be attained.

The degree to which righteousness is imputed to us is hard to feel. Dt. 32:12 states that there was no strange God with Israel- but Ez. 20 says they took the idols of Egypt with them. God counted wayward Israel as righteous; at that time, as Balaam said, God did not see iniquity in Israel, nor behold the perversity that was in Jacob. Paul speaks of the fruits of righteousness, the same Greek word translated " justification" (Phil. 1:11). Justification by faith brings forth fruits of righteousness. When the disciples argued about who should be the greatest, the Lord replied that " it is not so among you: whosoever will be great among you shall be your minister" (Mk .10:43 R. V.). He expected them to live up to the righteousness which He imputed to them.

Disregarding Others' Judgment Of Us

If *God* is our justifier, and imputed righteousness is a reality to us, where is he that condemns us, or lays any guilt to our charge (Rom. 8:33,34)? And yet in family life, at work, in ecclesial relationships...we are so so quick to feel and hurt from the possible insinuations of others against us. We seek to justify ourselves, to correct gossip and misrepresentation, to " take up" an issue to clear our name. We all tend to be far too sensitive about what others may be implying about us. All this reflects a sad lack of appreciation of the wonder of the fact that

we are justified *by God*, and in His eyes- which is surely the ultimately important perspective- we are without fault before the throne of grace, covered in the imputed and peerless righteousness of the Lord. Paul, misrepresented and slandered more than most brethren, came to conclude: " But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me [right now] is the Lord" (1 Cor. 4:3-4). The judge is the justifier, according to this argument. Paul is not justified by himself or by other men, because they are not his judge. The fact that God alone is judge through Christ [another first principle] means that nobody can ultimately justify us or condemn us. " Many seek the favour of the ruler ['judge']; but every man's judgment cometh from the Lord" (Prov. 29:26). The false claims of others can do nothing to ultimately damage us, and our own efforts at self-justification are in effect a denial of the fact that the Lord is the judge, not us, and therefore He alone can and will justify. In appealing to the Corinthians not to take each other to court, Paul reasons: " Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom?" (1 Cor. 6:9). He uses the " know ye not?" rubric several times in his writings (e.g. 6:19 in this context) to point the new converts back to the implications of the basic doctrines they had recently converted to. If we believe that there will be a righteous judgment, and those responsible who have sinned will suffer the awful experience of rejection...then why seek to judge them yourself, in this life? Why worry about the prosperity of the wicked within the ecclesia if you really believe that the wicked will not be in the Kingdom? That is such an awful thing that one need not worry about trying to judge them ourselves in this life. Take comfort in the fact that judgment is coming...that's Paul's message, built as it is on the implications of basic doctrines.

In the parable of the persistent widow, the Lord Jesus speaks of her begging for "justice", and that "justice" is to be given at the Lord's return (Lk. 18:3,7 RVmg.). Revelation contains the same theme, of the second coming meaning "justice" for those now suffering *in*justice. But Luke 18 continues the theme of justice by recording another parable, in which the man acceptable with God goes back to his house "justified" (Lk. 18:14). The point surely is that the wonder of being justified by God now should eclipse all the pain of human injustice which the widow so keenly felt- even though justice will ultimately be given at the last day, we can experience it in spiritual terms right now.

Not Pleasing Men

These thoughts are meshed with another first principle in Jn. 5:44, where the RVmg. has the Lord telling the Jews that they sought glory " one of another" because they didn't seek the glory that comes from the one God. Because there is only one God, there is only one glory, one Name of God, one standard of spirituality, one judge, one justifier. Whilst men seek glory and approbation and acceptance and justification from other men, they are denying the principle of one God. If there is only one God, we should seek His honour and justification, to the *total* exclusion of that of men. Hosea had revealed this truth earlier: " I am the Lord thy God...and thou shalt know no god but me: for there is no saviour beside me...neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods: for in thee [i.e. thee alone] the fatherless findeth mercy" (Hos. 13:4; 14:3). Because God alone can give salvation and mercy, therefore there is no space for worshipping or seeking for the approbation of anything or anyone else; for the receipt of mercy and salvation are the only ultimate things worth seeking. There is only one God who can give them, who can give imputed righteousness, and therefore we should seek for His acceptance alone.

Positive Self Image

But the very same Greek word is used in Romans of *our* self-perception. We must count / impute ourselves as righteous men and women, and count each other as righteous on the basis of recognizing each others' faith rather than works: " Therefore we conclude [we count / impute / consider] that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law... Likewise reckon [impute] ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord" . (Rom. 3:28; 6:11). We should *feel* clean and righteous, and act accordingly, both in our own behaviour and in our feelings towards each other. The mind of love imputes no evil to others, as God doesn't to us (1 Cor. 13:5; AV " thinketh no evil" , s.w. to count / impute in Romans). And again the word occurs in 2 Cor 3:5: " Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to *think* [s.w. impute] any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God" . We *are* able to count / feel to ourselves as righteous; for God has counted us righteous. And if we can believe this, we will overcome that difficulty which there is within every one of us of truly counting our brother to be righteous, of having the love that truly believes and sees only the best in others. 2 Pet. 1:1 RV speaks of us as having faith in the imputed righteousness of our God and our Saviour Jesus. We cannot believe in imputed righteousness unless we have firmly set our faith in the fact and appreciation of the fact that the Father and Son are there, and they are righteous. This may sound obvious. But if we do really believe it, we cannot be idle in this knowledge of Christ; it will elicit in us a response (:8 RV).

Positive About Others

We will perceive that others too are counted as righteous because they are in Christ, and we will likewise seek to count them as having imputed righteousness even as we feel and know God has so counted us. In a poorly translated verse, Paul seeks to persuade Philemon to think more highly of his renegade brother Onesimus: " That the communication [RV fellowship] of thy faith may become effectual [through] the acknowledging of every good thing that is in you in Christ" (Philemon 6). The power to share our faith is rooted in realizing that we have been counted righteous through our being in Christ. As God reckons us righteous, so we must reckon each other (Rom. 3:28; 4:3,5,24 RV). This is an immense challenge, but it comes directly from the doctrine of imputed righteousness. Our being justified / counted righteous by God's grace is the very basis and essence of our salvation. And yet, as ever, we can't be passive to this wonder. We too are to seek to count others as righteous, seeing them for who they are as 'in Christ'. Every time we are sinned against, or perceive the weakness and spiritual incompleteness in our brother or sister who is in Christ... we have a wonderful opportunity to count them as righteous, in the same way as we are counted righteous through being in Christ. The Hebrew word *tsadaq*, to count righteous, to justify, is used about our justification of others in Dan. 12:3- those who count many as righteous will shine as the stars for ever [AV "turn many to righteousness" rather misleadingly gives the idea of converting others by preaching, but that's not the idea of the Hebrew].

Gripped By Grace

The wonder of justification by grace should grip us. If we truly perceive it, we can no longer be passive. The antithesis between the Christian life and the life of bourgeois respectability is at an end. No longer can we cling to our comfortable secular existence and simply go to church and glance at a Bible. We will be gripped by grace to show forth a similar generosity to others.

Humility

Hab. 2:4 is the classic OT passage about imputed righteousness, quoted multiple times by Paul in this context, but the contrast is between those who are proud, and the justified-by-faith who are humble. It's possible that in its first context, this statement was a rebuke to Habakkuk's justification by works mentality. Hab. 2:5 speaks of Israel's enemies as proud, as if to suggest that their sin and Israel's were essentially the same- the pride that comes from refusing to accept imputed righteousness and its' demand for humility from those who receive it.

Joy

" Being therefore justified by faith, let us have peace... let us rejoice... let us also rejoice in our tribulations" (Rom. 5:1-3 RV). If we really feel justified due to righteousness being imputed to us, then this will give us a joyful perspective on all suffering. For the reality that we are counted righteous will mean that all tribulation " under the sun" is not so ultimately meaningful; and thus we will find all joy and peace through believing.

Participating In His Representation

It is exactly because the Lord Jesus was and is our representative, that we can have His righteousness imputed to us. Yet a caveat needs to be sounded, I feel, about baldly stating that Jesus is either our representative or our substitute. Whilst I firmly go for 'representative' as opposed to 'substitute', the fact the Lord is our representative doesn't mean that we simply gape at Him in wonder and admiration, as a Roman Catholic may gaze at an icon of Jesus. The fact He is our representative beckons us to active *participation* in His life and self-sacrifice; even to the death of the cross, however that may be articulated in our lives. Being Christ's representative, as He was ours, demands transformation. It has astutely been observed: "It is not about substitution, the replacement of something old by something new, but about transformation, the turning of the already existing to new account"(1).

Obedience

Note the logic of Lev. 20:8 and indeed the whole spirit of the Law given at Sinai: *Because* it is Yahweh who sanctifies / counts righteous His people, *therefore*, in thankful response, "you shall keep my statutes and do them". As they stood and sat before Yahweh and Moses, He sanctified them, or in Ezekiel's terms, picked up a sickly baby and turned her *in His eyes* into a beautiful woman. And their *response* to that imputed righteousness was to keep the laws they were given.

Notes

(1) Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement In Christian History* (New York: Orbis, 1998) p. 28.

2.31 Despite being saddled with our nature, the Lord Jesus Christ died and rose again for me, for my justification and salvation, and won freedom from sin. His life and death were a surrender of all to the cause of my redemption, to God's glory.

Freedom From Sin

And so I too must surrender all, I will willingly strive to do this, for the glorious wonder of knowing this Man who died for me to enable such great salvation. He died and rose so that He might be made Lord of His people (Rom. 14:9); if we believe in His resurrection and subsequent Lordship, He will be the Lord of our lives, Lord of every motion of our hearts. We are yet in our sins, if Christ be not risen (1 Cor. 15:17). But He has risen, and therefore we are no longer dominated by our moral weakness. Because baptism united us with His resurrection, we are no longer in our sins (Col. 2:13). Therefore the baptized believer will not "continue in sin" if he really understand and believes this (Rom. 6:1 and context). Ours is the life of freedom with Him, for He was and is our representative [note that He represents us now, in His freedom and eternal life, just as much as He did in His death].

We died and rose with Christ, if we truly believe in His representation of us and our connection with Him, then His freedom from sin and sense of conquest will be ours; as the man guilty of blood was to see in the death of the High Priest a representation of his own necessary death, and thereafter was freed from the limitations of the city of refuge (Num. 35:32,33). Because Christ really did rise again, and we have a part in that, we must *therefore* abstain from sin, quit bad company and labour with the risen, active Lord (1 Cor. 15:34,58). The representative nature of the Lord's death means that we are pledged to live out His self-crucifixion as far as we can; to re-live the crucifixion process in our imagination, to come to that point where we *know* we wouldn't have gone through with it, and to grasp with real wonder and gratitude the salvation of the cross. "As one has died for all, then all have died, and that He died for all in order to have the living live no longer for themselves but for Him who died and rose for them" (2 Cor. 5:14,15 Moffat). It has been powerfully commented: "To know oneself to have been involved in the sacrificial death of Christ, on account of its representational character, is to see oneself committed to a sacrificial life, to a re-enactment in oneself of the cross" [\(1\)](#).

Such is the power of a true, lived-out baptism and faith that we have found freedom from sin. If we have really died and resurrected with the Lord, we will be dead unto the things of this world (Col. 2:20; 3:1). This is why Paul could say that the greatest proof that Christ had risen from the dead was the change in character which had occurred within him (Acts 26:8 ff.). This was "the power of his resurrection"; and it works within us too. The death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth aren't just facts we know; if they are truly believed, there is within them the power of ultimate transformation.

True Faith

Nearly everyone in the first century believed in the God-idea. There were very few atheists. Hence the radical nature of statements like 1 Pet. 1:21: we "through him [Jesus] are believers in God", because God raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of the Lord inspires faith in the Father to such an extent that anyone whose faith in 'God' is not based on the risen Jesus does not actually count as a believer in God.

Preaching

Paul in 1 Cor. 15 lists ten serious consequences of failing to believe that Christ rose. One of these is that there was no reason for him to constantly risk his life to preach the Gospel if Christ was not risen. It stands to reason that the fact Jesus *has* risen is an inspiration to risk

and give our lives, time and again, in an all out effort to spread that good news of freedom from sin to others.

Selfless Service

The wonder of the resurrection would totally affect our attitude to asking for things, the Lord taught in Jn. 16:23,26. "In that day [of marvelling in the resurrected Lord], ye shall ask me nothing...if ye shall ask anything of the Father, he will give it you [RV]...in that day you shall ask in my name...". What are we to make of all this talk of asking and not asking, in the 'day' of the resurrected Lord Jesus? My synthesis of it all is this: Due to the sheer wonder of the resurrection of the Lord, we will not feel the need to ask for anything for ourselves. The gift of freedom from sin is enough. Because if God gave us His Son and raised Him from the dead, we will serve for nothing, for no extra 'perks' in this life; and yet, wonder of wonders, *if* we shall ask, in His Name, we will receive. But we must ask whether the implications and wonder of the fact of the Lord's resurrection have had such an effect upon us...?

Note

(1) W.F. Barling, *The Letters To Corinth*.

Appendix 2: Excitement With God

I was once encouraging a depressed woman to pray. 'Do you pray?' , I asked. " Yes" , she replied. " But it's as if one part of my brain prays to another part of my brain, a black box that I call God or Jesus" . And I knew just what she meant. Like the Pharisee who prayed *with[in] himself*. The real, living God and active Lord Jesus can be so distant from us. Just propositional truths which we have learnt and know and repeat. We do not fully understand their ways- especially in view of recent calamities amongst us- and we can resign ourselves to this to the extent that God seems far away. Just an idea which we believe in. Yet, God has feelings! He is real, there, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord. And the passion of the Father and Son, their extreme sensitivity and perception, is what structures our moment by moment life before them. It is this which I want to talk about.

2-1 God As A Man In Love

Israel is so often set up as the bride of God (Is. 54:5; 61:10; 62:4,5; Jer. 2:2; 3:14; Hos. 2:19,20). This is why any infidelity to God is spoken of as adultery (Mal. 2:11; Lev. 17:7; 20:5,6; Dt. 31:16; Jud. 2:17; 8:27,33; Hos. 9:1). The very language of Israel 'selling themselves to do iniquity' uses the image of prostitution. This is how God feels our even temporary and fleeting acts and thoughts of unfaithfulness. This is why God is jealous for us (Ex. 20:15; 34:14; Dt. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15)- because His undivided love for us is so exclusive. He expects us to be totally *His*. Just as Israel were not to be like the Egyptians they were leaving, nor like the Canaanites into whose land they were going (Lev. 18:1-5; 20:23,24). We are to be a people separated unto Him. When God as a man in love said that " I have been broken with their whorish heart" (Ez. 6:9 RV), He meant it. Sinful man broke the heart of Almighty God. The tone of God's speeches in Jeremiah varies wildly, moving abruptly from outraged cries of pain to warm entreaties of love, and then to desperate pleas for a new start. He is responding like a jilted lover, who gained His Israel by wooing them in the wilderness. He

felt the pain of Israel's rejection, and went through very human-like reactions to this. The book of Hosea shows all this lived out in a real human life. Hosea was representative of God, and yet he married a flirt [and worse than that] called Gomer, and in their life together they portrayed graphically the pain of God's relationship with His people. The image of God as a man in love, as the wounded lover which we meet in Hosea and Jeremiah ought to deeply impress us. God can describe Himself in absolute verisimilitude as being pressed down underneath Israel " as a cart presseth that is full of sheaves" (Am. 2:13 RV). In this we see the humility of God, the extent to which He risked His feelings for those He created...and the hurt He thereby received. The God who created all of existence subjects Himself to such humiliation from His creation. One is almost haunted by the reality of a God who lets our response to Him count that much. It inspires us to implore Israel and all men, on our hands and knees, to not reject the love of God, as a man in love, which is in the Gospel. And it unceasingly challenges us to ourselves respond to that love as we ought, hour by hour in daily life. To respect His feelings. We run the risk that our study *about* God, our necessary defining of Him in doctrinal propositions, is almost a taming of God into words and concepts...to the point that we can fail to see Him as a real person, and so lose the force of the passionate relationship with Him which God seeks from us above all else.

Jeremiah contains many examples of the passion of God as a man in love for His people. He tells Jeremiah that he is not to pray for the people, because He will not hear him. Yet finally the people come to Jeremiah and ask him to pray for them; and he does so. And God hears him, because " I repent me of the evil that I have done unto you" (Jer. 42:7,10). Here was the God who cannot repent, repenting. Like a loving Father punishing His child deservedly, He stops half way through and feels He is being too hard. He punished Israel less than their iniquities deserve; and yet He seems to feel in passages like this that He has punished them too much. " Israel is not forsaken, nor Judah, of his God...though their land is full of guilt against the Holy One of Israel" (Jer. 51:5). God had promised to forsake them if they sinned. They sinned. Yet He couldn't bring Himself to fully forsake them. The shame of it all was that even with a God like this, the people stubbornly refused to accept Him, even after He had repented of the evil done to them.

It is hard to really believe that God feels so positively towards us. That when you summoned the courage to preach the Truth to that man in the office, when you curbed your tongue in a domestic disagreement... you touched the heart of Almighty God, with joy. This thought alone is enough to transform human life and behaviour, if it takes deep lodgement within us. We all struggle with inadequacy. I used to think I had a far higher dose of it, and was better at hiding it, than anyone else I knew. But as one gets to know people better, it becomes apparent that inadequacy and a lack of full acceptance of ourselves is a major human trait. We feel inadequate as employees, students, parents, partners...fearing we won't make the grade. And we tend to feel the same way before our God too. But in Christ, clothed with His righteousness, we need not feel like this. Indeed, we *should* not. We have tended to misquote a number of Bible verses to justify our feeling that we can never please God- e.g. Is. 64:6 " All our righteousness are as filthy rags" . Yet the context is clearly speaking of the wicked within Israel, whereas the true people of God do righteousness which pleases Him. We *can* and *do* please God! The wonder of this should never cease to impress us. J.R.R. Tolkien truly observed: " ...the chief purpose of life, for any one of us, is to increase according to our capacity our knowledge of God by all the means we have, and to be moved by it to praise and thanks. To do as we say in the Gloria in Excelsis: ...We praise you, we call you holy, we worship you, we proclaim your glory, we thank you for the greatness of your splendour."

The God Who Really Is

One of the greatest false doctrines of all time is the trinity- which claims that there are three "persons" in a Godhead. Trinitarian theologians borrowed a word- *persona* in Latin, *prosopon* in Greek- which was used for the mask which actors wore on stage. But for us, God doesn't exist in personas. He exists, as God the Father. The real, true God, who isn't acting, projecting Himself through a mask, playing a role to our eyes; the God who is so crucially real and *alive*, there at the other end of our prayers, pulling at the other end of the cord... What we know of Him in His word is what and who He really is. It may not be *all* He is, but it is nevertheless the truth of the real and living God. And this knowledge should be the most arresting thing in the whole of our existence. So often the prophets use the idea of "knowing God" as an idiom for living a life totally dominated by that knowledge. The new covenant which we have entered is all about 'knowing' Yahweh. And Jer. 31:34 comments: " They shall all know me...for I will forgive their iniquity" . The knowledge of God elicits repentance, real on-your-knees repentance; and reveals an equally real forgiveness. Day after day. Night after night. It is possible for those in Christ to *in practice* not know God at all. Thus Paul exhorted the Corinthian ecclesia: " Awake to righteousness and sin not: for some have no knowledge of God" (1 Cor. 15:34 RV).

For all these reasons I can only accept that when we read of God as a man in love, feeling and acting emotionally, being provoked to anger, being grieved at His heart, desperately believing that " surely they will reverence my son" , well, this is the real God. Not just idioms and figures of speech and God presenting Himself in human language; but the real God, whose heart really and truly bleeds. Each of the prophets which God sent He had arisen early to send (Jer. 25:4). Before the days of alarm clocks, to get up early in the morning was an act of the will. God made 'effort' and put special determination into every word which His prophets spoke, And we should read those words with this in mind. I am aware that men have created a fancy word, 'anthropomorphisms', to try to explain away how and why God is described in such human terms as He is. In other words, God doesn't really have a hand just because we read of His hand, nor really have a heart / mind because we read of His heart, nor really feel surprise and pain because we read of Him experiencing this. It's all, we are told, 'anthropomorphism'- God being spoken of as having human attributes although actually, He doesn't. God as a man in love is only a vague figure, on this reading. Maybe I am too primitive, simplistic, somehow like a farm kid coming in to talk with the big city theologians. But, for me, all these images of God which we meet in Scripture point to a strong reality behind them. There must surely be a congruence between them, and who God really *is*. Otherwise, the person of God Himself remains a total mystery, and His word is not His true self revelation. I cannot accept this. We are made in God's image; we know the feelings of an angry parent or a spurned lover, and when God uses these images about Himself, I believe this is how He *really* feels. He's not just playing with words. This is how He really is.

Our brethren have often and so rightly pointed out to us that we are just as much at risk from idolatry as were Israel. Our worlds, our lives and hearts, are full of potential idols. And what, in the most fundamental essence, is wrong with idolatry? It seems to me that idolatry *trivializes* this wonderful God of whom we have spoken. It makes the Almighty Jehovah of Israel into a piece of wood or stone, or into a smart career or new house. And so *anything* that reduces the majesty, the surprise, the passion, the vitality in our relationship with God is an idol. Time and again in our lives, God is edged out by petty distractions- a car that needs repair, a leaking gutter, a broken window. One could almost weep for the frequency and the way in which all this occurs, so tragically often.

In Hosea 11, God likens Himself to Israel's father, teaching His little child to walk for the first time. As the child 'makes it' into the Father's arms for the first time, there must be a tremendous *excitement* for the Father. A few uncertain, jittering steps- and He is thrilled and telling the whole world about it with joy. No matter how clever or powerful that man is in the world. And so this is how God was with His people, it's how it is with us too as we take our first unsure steps after baptism. He has the capacity for thrill and excitement, just as we do, who are made in His image. Remembering how He had felt towards His child Israel in earlier days, God cries out with a stab of pain: " How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?" . The memory of Israel's childhood was just too much. It made God change His mind with regard to totally rejecting His wayward son. He had told them that they had an incurable wound- but, He then decided to cure that wound (Jer. 30:12,17).

The Struggle Of God

The internal struggles of God often aren't recorded in the Bible's historical records. Reading Exodus, we would never imagine the kind of internal struggle referenced in Ez. 20:8,9 where we read of God decided to pour out His fury upon Israel in Egypt because they refused to part with their idols; and yet "I wrought for my name's sake... wherefore I caused them to go forth out of the land of Egypt". And how often does He struggle over us, and we in our smallness and insensitivity just wander onwards in our half-committed lives...?

2-2 God Changing His Mind

And God does change His mind. Remember how He told Moses that He was going to destroy Israel and make of Moses a great nation. And Moses pleaded with God. And God changed His mind. Just like He " repented" , changed His mind, that He had made man at the time of the flood. Moses was specifically told to go away from the congregation, and yet he ran towards them in order to make atonement for them (Num. 16:45,47). Moses was so close to God that he could apparently 'disobey' Him because Moses knew there was a chance of changing God's intentions. He was so close to God- and in this case, God did indeed change His intentions. He had only just changed them over another matter, in relenting from destroying all Israel due to Korah's rebellion- because Moses prayed for the people (Num. 16:21,22). And there are so many other examples:

- God had stated that Adam would surely die in *the day* he ate the fruit. He is made to suffer consequences for his sin, but God forgave him and did not slay him that day. He was told he must till the ground "all the *days*" [plural] of his life (Gen. 3:17)- reflecting how in wrath God remembered mercy and gave Adam many more days.

- God told Israel straight in Jud. 10:13: "Ye have forsaken me, and served other gods: wherefore I will deliver you no more". But they begged Him, and He did. And likewise in Hosea, He said He would give them up completely, but just couldn't bring Himself to do it. God changing His mind is a theme that runs through Hosea.

- He had promised to bring Israel in to the promised land. But He destroyed that generation- " and ye shall know my breach of promise" , or, " the altering of my purpose" (Num. 14:34). God's purpose *can* change. Because God can change His mind. He says so Himself.

- The Judaistic tendencies of the early Christians were a temptation for God to resume His demand of obedience to law as a basis for salvation- a yoke which was unbearable (Acts

15:10). This suggests that God is so willing to go along with what His people really want that to return to some form of legalism was at least a possible future which God entertained at that time.

- Amos preached the message of coming judgment upon Israel and then due to his prayer, averted it. Days / months later perhaps, he added to the record of his prophecies: " The Lord repented for this: It shall not be, saith the Lord" (Am. 7:1 cp. 3; 7:4 cp. 6). The prophesied sending of fire and grasshoppers upon Israel was recorded, but then averted by Amos' prayer.

- Jeremiah chose to live with those whom he had been told were the "evil figs" who wouldn't repent- in the hope that they would (Jer. 40:6), just as Isaiah and Ezekiel still seem to have held out hope that Israel would repent despite having been told at the start of their ministry that they would not be listened to. This hoping against hope that God will change His stated predictions about human lack of response is surely not defiance of God, but rather a recognition of His great sensitivity to human repentance, and that God changing His mind is a common Bible phenomena.

- Some prophecies are dependent on prayer for their fulfillment. Take Is. 62:1: " For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness" . But this is dependent upon prayer: " I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem...ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give him no rest *till* he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth" (:6,7). The prophecy that " I will not rest" was dependent for fulfillment upon the faithful continuing to pray and thereby not giving Him rest. Of course, they pray from their own freewill; there is the possibility they won't pray, and thereby, surely, there's the possibility the statement " I will not rest" is purely conditional on our prayers...?

- When Hezekiah studied the words of Micah, " did he not fear the Lord, and besought the Lord, and the Lord repented him of the evil which he had pronounced against him" (Jer. 26:19). Those words of prophecy had their fulfillment annulled or delayed thanks to Hezekiah's prayer and repentance. Likewise Jonah's prophecy that in 40 days Nineveh would be destroyed, unconditionally, was nullified by their repentance.

- God does not "repent" as men do, but He can still change His mind. Samuel therefore wept to God for Saul to change his mind, and therefore for God to relent on His stated purpose concerning him (1 Sam. 15:11). Yet despite telling Saul that "the strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent", Samuel appears to have continued praying for a change of mind from God and Saul (1 Sam. 15:29); we can conclude this from the way God had to keep telling Samuel to stop (1 Sam. 15:25; 16:1). This is very similar to how God told Ezekiel that He would not spare nor repent of His attitude to Israel, and will judge them according to their ways (Ez. 24:14); yet according to His grace, it is many times recorded that He *did* and *will* spare them, and does not judge them according to the merits of their sins.

- The principle of God changing His mind is summed up in Jeremiah 18. It has been truly commented about this chapter: " Whenever a piece of pottery turned out imperfect the potter would take the clay and make it into something else. God says that this is the principle behind His actions. If He says He is going to build up a nation but the nation disobeys Him the prophecy will not be fulfilled. Equally, if He says He is going to destroy a nation and the

nation repents, He will not carry out His intention" . This is why God Himself reflects that He " said surely..." , *but* changed His mind (Zeph. 3:7; Jer. 31:20).

If there is genuine freewill, it is apparent enough that God's purposes must be to some extent conditional. If the Lord had failed in the wilderness temptations, " there was the possibility that the purpose of God would have been circumvented" (Frank Birch). All this explains why the fulfillment of prophecy can only be perceived at the time of fulfillment- it is impossible to know in advance how it will be fulfilled. It isn't a time-line of future events which we are to discern. It should also be born in mind that " the teaching of Jesus [is] that the purpose of prophecy is that we shall be able to recognize the signs when they appear, not that we shall be able to predict the future" (Cyril Tennant):

- " I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe" (Jn. 14:29).
- The disciples did not expect Jesus to enter into Jerusalem " sitting on an ass's colt" in fulfillment of Zech. 9:9. But when He did, then soon afterwards, all became clear to them- that He had fulfilled this prophecy (Jn. 12:16).
- Likewise with prophecies such as " the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up" in Ps. 69:9, and even the Lord's own prophecies of His resurrection. When it happened, " his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture (Ps. 69:9), and the word which Jesus had said" (Jn. 2:17-22).

And the Lord Jesus, who spoke and acted the words of God, was clearly willing to change His position too, depending on human response. Remember how He initially declined to heal the daughter of the Canaanite woman because, as He clearly stated, He had been sent *only* unto "the lost sheep of the house of Israel"; and it was not appropriate, He said, to take the food from those children and feed it to Gentile dogs (Mt. 14:24,26). He may well have had in mind the Divine principle of not throwing pearls before swine [Gk. 'wild dogs']. But...He changed. He healed the woman's daughter. He was so deeply impressed with her perception and faith that He changed the operation of His principles.

God's changing of mind should never be taken to mean that He is somehow fickle. It is because His Name / characteristics "endure for ever", unchanging, that *therefore* He 'repents Himself', changes His mind, in the judgment of His servants (Ps. 135:13,14). His gracious 'changing of mind' is therefore to be seen as part of His consistent grace and loving mercy towards His people.

The Power Of Prayer

In all the above examples, prayer and repentance can change God's stated purpose. Prayer brings about this phenomena of God changing His mind. Prayer changes things. It really does. What would otherwise have happened can be changed by prayer. We, little and tiny humans, can change the mind of Almighty God. This is the extent of His sensitivity to us. Reflect how Abraham reasoned with God over Sodom's destruction. If 40 righteous had been found there....it wouldn't have been destroyed, thanks to Abraham's prayer. And he reasons with God, down to 10 righteous. Now I ask...if Abraham had asked: " If...*one* righteous man be found there...?" . Would God have said 'No'? We don't know, but the impression I have is He would have agreed. The salvation of Sodom depended upon Abraham's breadth of vision. God's mercy is upon us, and upon others, according as we hope in Him. All of the above may have sounded philosophical. But the bottom line is: prayer changes things. And seeing that it

does, well then *pray on your knees, fervently!* Not cuddled up in bed about to fall asleep. Jacob is a symbol of us all. He became Israel, he who struggles with God. And this is a key feature of all those who comprise the true Israel. When God told Moses to leave Him alone to destroy them, and go back down to the people immediately (Dt. 9:12), Moses stayed on to plead with God not to destroy them. And God listened (Ex. 32:7-14). He repented of the evil He had thought to do. He changed His mind, because Moses stayed on. There is an element of striving with God in prayer, knowing that His mind *is* open to change (Rom. 15:30). This is what stimulates me to what intensity in prayer I can muster. That God *is* open to hearing and even changing His holy mind about something. Such is His sensitivity to us. Such is His love, that God changing His mind becomes really feasible as a concept. And such is the scary implication of the total freewill which the Father has afforded us. This is why God could reason with Moses as a man speaks to his friend and vice versa. It was a dynamic, two way relationship in thought and prayer and being. This is why Jesus likens requesting things from God to a man asking a favour of his friend at midnight (Lk. 11:5,9). We are to see God as *our friend* to whom like Abraham, we respectfully and rather awkwardly present ourselves. And He sees us as *His* friends. There's a wonderful mutuality between a man and his God.

2-3 Limiting The Omniscience Of God

All these things are hard to really believe if we think that God knows all things from the beginning and knows the outcome of every prayer and repentance. The passion and emotion would be taken out of it. It is clear enough that God at times limits His power. He *could* save everybody, indeed He wishes to do this, yet He allows human freewill to be genuine and meaningful, to the extent that not all will be saved. Israel in the wilderness "limited the Holy One of Israel". He was left by Israel as a mighty man powerless to save (Jer. 14:9). The Greek word *dunatos* translated 16 times "mighty" is also 13 times translated "possible". God's might is His possibility. But our freewill can limit that might. All things are possible to God, and therefore all things are possible to the believer- but if the believer has no faith, then, those possibilities of God will not occur (Lk. 1:49; Mk. 9:23; 10:27). And so I have no problem with a God who limits His omniscience. Here are some further examples of God limiting His knowledge:

- Recall how He "went down" to Sodom to see if they had really sinned as much as it seemed. This was surely the omniscience of God being restrained in acting like that.
- He forgets our sins; and yet God knows everything that happens and is thought today, and also yesterday. And yet, He limits that total knowledge by forgetting our sins. In Amos 8:7 God swore He would never forget Israel's sin. Yet the same word is used in Is. 65:16 of how God hid their sin from His eyes. God restrained His omniscience. He erased His own permanent memory as it were.
- When God wanted to heal Israel, then He discovered their sin (Hos. 7:1; Ez. 16:57). Why speak like this if God already knew their sin from the beginning?
- Scripture repeatedly speaks as if God notices things and is then hurt by what He

sees (Jonah 3:10; Gen. 29:31; Ex. 3:4; Dt. 32:19; 2 Kings 14:26; 2 Chron. 12:7; Ez. 23:13; Is. 59:15 cp. Lk. 7:13). If He knew in advance what they were going to do, this language is hard for me to understand. But God is therefore hurt and 'surprised' at sin- He saw Israel as the firstripe grapes, but they were worshipping Baal even then (Hos. 9:9). Thus God can allow Himself to feel an element of surprise- and this was a shock to Jeremiah, who queried: "Why are You like a man who is caught by surprise...?" (Jer. 14:9).

- The eagerness of the God who was in love with His woman Israel is quite something. " Surely they are my people, children that will not lie!" (Is. 63:8), He triumphed. But this was because of His mercy and love to them (v.7). That love as it were blinded His eyes to their sin. And this is the basis of our being counted righteous if we are in His beloved Son. But with Israel, " *then* I saw that she was defiled...*then* my mind was alienated" (Ez. 23:13,18). How does this square with the omniscience of God? He stopped restraining His omniscience. He saw them for who they were, unfaithful, and reacted. He did everything He could for His vineyard, and was then so bitterly disappointed when it brought forth wild grapes (Is. 5:4).

- God sent His Son to Israel, thinking " they will reverence him when they see him" (Lk. 20:13). But Isaiah 53 had prophesied that when Israel saw Him, they would see no beauty in Him and crucify Him. Yet God restrained that knowledge, in His love and positive hope for His people. Likewise Jesus, it seems to me limited His foreknowledge of Judas. He knew from the beginning who would betray him. One of the 12 was a traitor. Yet Judas was His own familiar friend in whom He trusted. Just as the Father thought that His people "surely" would reverence His Son, so He was 'certain' that if His people went to Babylon in captivity, "surely then shalt thou be ashamed... for all thy wickedness" (Jer. 22:22). But the reality was that they grew to like the soft life of Babylon and refused to obey the command to return to God's land. Such was and is the hopefulness of God.

- Repentance, change of mind, can be hid from God's eyes (Hos. 13:14). He says in Ez. 5:11 that He will withdraw His eye, that it will not spare- when He saw the suffering of Israel at the hands of the invaders He sent (RVmg.). The idea of things being hidden from God's eyes is surely a poetic way of saying He limits His omniscience. Likewise God did not let His eye spare in punishing His people (Ez. 5:11; 9:5), after the pattern of His telling Moses to 'let me alone' that He might destroy them. It's as if God knows that He *is* emotional and is capable of being influenced by those emotions. And yet, God is so torn. He wanted to destroy them. But He wanted to save them. They were His children. And, worst of all, He " often" went through this feeling (Ps. 106:45).

- God speaks in Is. 65:16 of His ability to hide things from His own eyes- and the context speaks of the "former troubles" of Judah's sins.

- " I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind" (Jer. 7:31; 19:5) was God's comment upon infant sacrifice. One could think that all possibilities have occurred to an omniscient, eternal God. But, no, not all. And He is hurt and

shocked when His people devise perversions which He Himself has never even dreamed of. In this alone we see a limitation of the omniscience of God ⁽¹⁾.

This explains why God's anger comes up in His face; why He speaks in the fire of His jealousy when His 'woman' has been unfaithful (Ez. 36:5). It also gives us a window into how God can say that His bowels, His innermost heart, are troubled for His people when He sees them suffer (Jer. 31:20). These wonderful, wonderful words would lose most of their power if God calmly foresaw it all coming, and men were just acting out the part He knew they would play. In this is the vitality and dynamism of our relationship with God. We are made in God's image, and so we too have feelings of surprise, shock, hurt, anger, revenge. God does too. As we pray, as we struggle to understand, as we Hope in His grace, our feelings and His come together in a wonderful relationship.

Many times we read of God being provoked to remember someone, often for good (Lev. 24:7 LXX "that God may mercifully remember" ; Ps. 69:1 LXX; 37:1 LXX; Zech. 6:14; 1 Kings 17:18). This language of limitation surely suggests that the God who could be omniscient over time, not needing to have anything brought back to His memory, allows Himself to 'forget' so that sin or righteousness again brings things to His remembrance. Thus generosity and prayer is a memorial before God in the sense that it brings a person to His memory or attention (Acts 10:4), and He appropriately responds in their lives. When sin gets to a certain point, it causes other sins to be remembered by God, and thus judgment comes (Rev. 18:5). It has been suggested by Joachim Jeremias ⁽²⁾ that the Lord's command to break bread in remembrance of Him can mean 'that God may remember me'. On Passover evening the standard haggadah prayer asks God to remember the Messiah: "May there arise...the remembrance of the Messiah, son of David thy servant, and the remembrance of Jerusalem...may their remembrance come before thee, for rescue..." ⁽³⁾. So it could be that through our breaking of bread, we especially cause the Almighty to be aware of the need to fulfill Passover in the sending of Jesus back to earth. We are always in His presence, He is omnipresent, and yet surely there is a degree to which we are the more especially in His presence at some times rather than others. The breaking of bread is one such example.

Some Philosophical Reflections

God so respects human freewill that the future is in some sense 'open' for Him. If every human decision were to be somehow already known to God, then all the Bible talk about God's hurt, shock, surprise, joy at human decisions, and His willingness to change His plans in response to human repentance and prayer... all this becomes somehow words lacking meaning. He would be a God who simply appears that way when actually He is not like that at all. Yet the God revealed in the Bible is surely, I submit, God as He really is- and not just a face He wishes to project. Rather than foreknowing human decisions, I would prefer to say that God has objectives in history, and His grace propels us towards fulfilling them without inappropriately forcing our hand- which means that the future is in this sense open. That the future is open is not quite the same as saying that God doesn't know the future; it depends what we mean by 'future'. If by its nature that future

is 'open', then the question 'So does God know it ahead of time?' is inappropriate. We are dealing with different categories. This all gives so much more meaning to the value of human repentance and freewill decisions. The parables of the lost coin, sheep and son being found again (Luke 15) all involve an element of agonizing over the loss, and then the rush of relief and joy, even surprise, when the lost is recovered. And these parables speak of God's feelings about human repentance. The argument against what I'm saying, of course, is that all this is mere anthropomorphism- God speaking of Himself in human terms although He is not like this. But my counter would be that in this case, who is God? Can we meaningfully say that the Bible reflects God as He really is? I believe it does. I don't deny that especially in the Old Testament, we do encounter anthropomorphisms- but I would suggest that these are to prepare the way for us to meet God manifest in a man, in Jesus, in the New Testament. The reality is, that Jacob and many others wrestled with God in prayer- and prevailed. Just as Moses changed God's purpose with Israel, and Nineveh's repentance changed God's stated plan to destroy them at that time. Note how in these contexts, both Moses and Jacob asked God for His Name- "which in Semitic thinking gave the one knowing the name power over the one named" (4). The idea is so breathtaking that we struggle to by all means find some excuse why this cannot be the case- that God could somehow be so open to us, so sensitive to us, so respectful of us, that He is prepared to be change His plans for the sake of our prayers and repentances.

Notes

(1) But what, then, of "foreknowledge"? I have suggested that God limits His foreknowledge, to the extent that He feels genuine hurt, surprise, joy etc. in response to human behaviour. But it is possible to understand foreknowledge another way. The same word can have two meanings, depending upon whose perspective one has- God's, or man's. It has been observed: "A word like 'foreknowledge' makes sense only when considered from our earth-bound viewpoint. It presumes that time proceeds sequentially, frame by frame. From God's viewpoint...the word has a considerably different meaning. Strictly speaking, God does not 'foresee' us doing things. He simply *sees* us doing them, in an eternal present". The idea of God operating in an "eternal present" means that God doesn't practice 'foreknowledge' as we imagine it; He could do, but He doesn't. It's an inappropriate concept for a being Who is outside of time.

(2) Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words Of Jesus* (London: S.C.M., 1973 ed.), pp. 250-255.

(3) *The Passover Haggadah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1953), p. 63.

(4) John Sanders, *The Openness of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994) p. 183.

2-4 The Passion Of Jesus

The Son of God also has feelings. It was Alfred Norris who first brought to my attention what he called "the sufferings of the risen Lord", the ongoing passion of Jesus. That He, in Heaven, can be crucified afresh by the apostasy of His brethren on earth. He goes through it all again, in His feelings. So many times the New Testament labours the point that Jesus is *seated* at the right hand of God. And yet Stephen sees Him *standing*- when he prays. The Lord Jesus was passionately involved in mediating that prayer. We need, each of us, to spend

time seeking to construct in our own minds an imagination of the person of Jesus. How He would have spoken, His body language. For we are to be His followers to the extent of being caught up in some kind of personality cult in this man, this more than man. We need to read His parables again and seek to hear once more His original tones, and experience anew the vital qualities of force, conflict, passion and authority which there were in the historical events. For this man, this Son of God, must *live* in *our* lives. We must be ever sensitive to His feelings for us, His involvement. He cannot just be a black box in our minds, a mechanism for offering prayer to God. He who *is*, right now in Heaven, is He who *was* 2000 years ago, the sinless lamb of God who walked around Galilee, who wept over Zion, who loved little children, who so felt for the parents of the sick ones, who beholding the self righteous young man "loved him", feeling that involuntary upwelling of fondness and delight in a person. And this Jesus is who He will eternally be at His return. This same, living, crying, laughing, passionate Jesus who walked the lanes of Galilee is the One we will meet in judgment, and the One we will eternally live with in a relationship that will never, and could never, become just the same old scene. And in that sense, we begin the eternal life with Him right now. For the passion of Jesus is as real as it was and will be. In Ps. 4:8 David spoke of how God "only makest me dwell in safety", or, makes me dwell in safety alone. The very same Hebrew words occur in Dt. 33:28 – Israel will "dwell in safety alone" in the Kingdom. David felt that even in the midst of hardship, this time of Kingdom blessing had come for him internally, in the peace of his own mind. Likewise in our lives the essence of the Kingdom can come. We live the eternal life now.

A Passionate Future

The passionate nature of God is to be expected, seeing that we are made in His image. And it was so clearly reflected in the passion of Jesus. We can reason back a tiny little bit...from how *we* are, to how He therefore must be. For, we are in His image and likeness. This, James says, is why we shouldn't curse our fellow man, we should respect her or him...because they are made in God's own image. We must respect not only their bodies but their feelings and sensibilities, which are also broadly modeled on those of God Himself. Our blessed Hope consists in being given God's nature. We will not, therefore, become passionless robots, working out an endless stream of administrative actions in God's Kingdom. For His nature isn't like that. Forget, for one moment, that 'the rich man and Lazarus' is a 'difficult passage'. Focus on how Lazarus is "in" Abraham's 'bosom' or chest (Lk. 16:23). This doesn't mean literally inside it. He was 'in' Abraham's arms, on his chest; and this is explained to us in v.25 as meaning that Lazarus was receiving "comfort" at the same time as the rich man was experiencing torment. Mic. 7:5 uses the same figure of being "in" a man's bosom to describe how a wife is held by her husband. And Lam. 2:12 uses it again to mean 'receiving comfort'. This is what the Kingdom will be like, especially immediately after our reward. For this is what the parable is about- the rich man will not be eternally tormented, his torment will be on knowing the reality of the fact that he stands there rejected. But while he is temporarily tormented, some poor beggar brother is getting comforted by Abraham. Both of them with Divine nature. Abraham holding the other brother to his chest and comforting him. And, in passing, this would interpret for us John's words in Jn.1:18: "The...son, who is in the bosom of the Father" (after His ascension). After His ordeal, Jesus was as it were receiving comfort from His Father. There was and is an emotional bond between them. And so there will be between us all in the Kingdom.

We will have our arms around each other. Comforting and congratulating. Laughing and crying. In the streets [or, the rubble] of Jerusalem. Who knows how it will actually be, but

something like shaking our heads all the time, images of the old life flashing back, now understood in a totally different context... grinning, crying, remembering the old times, hey that's the prophet Isaiah there...and...well...there's Natasha...I last saw her at Bible School...and I remember...we had hard words with each other...wretched man that I was... OK, we don't know how exactly it will be. Imagine it how you like. My simple point is that there will be the emotions of joy, sorrow, surprise, grief, anger, satisfaction, elation...for these are all parts of God's nature which we will then partake of.

The parable of Lk. 16 goes on to say that there will be those who will want to cross over from rejection to acceptance, and *also*- and note this- there will be some who will want to go the other way to save those in the group of the rejected- weeping, screaming, gnashing their teeth as they will be [\(1\)](#). But it won't be possible for them. Even in Divine nature, some of us will have the desire to do the impossible- to save those rejected. It will be rather like the Angels in the time of Ahab suggesting their plans of action to God, but they were all turned down except for one. To have Divine nature, as Angels do, doesn't preclude having emotional thoughts. Nor does it mean we will have 100% understanding of God's ways beamed into us.

Thus before the Lord of the harvest, *having received* the 'penny' of salvation and Divine nature, those who thought they had worked hardest complained that those they thought had done less, were still getting a penny. They were rebuked, but they still had their penny (cp. salvation; Mt. 20:11). The subsequent comment that the first shall be last might imply that they will be in the Kingdom, but in the least place. Robert Roberts wrote that he was certain that the only response of the saints once they are given Divine nature will be to break down in tears. And I agree with him. And the passion of Jesus may mean He does likewise. Being Divine doesn't mean you don't cry- in whatever way Divine beings cry. Which is why, in some ways, there are tears in Heaven as we pass through our vales of tears down here. Some will be in the Kingdom who have big questions about the justice of God even then (Mt. 20:12,13 " friend"); some will sit in the Kingdom in " shame" because they thought they were greater than other brethren (Lk. 14:9- cp. the elder brother?)- i.e. self-imposed shame and embarrassment; some remonstrate that a highly rewarded brother already has ten pounds, and surely doesn't need any more exaltation (Lk. 19:25). This all suggests that even after our acceptance at the judgment, we may be more 'human' (or whatever word I should use) than we may now imagine. More emotional, more seeking towards understanding, with a greater potential for eternal growth, than perhaps we have thought. Divine nature doesn't mean being passionless. Whichever hymn writer called the Kingdom " passionless renown" just, quite frankly, got it wrong [or was trying too hard to rhyme his words]. Because God *is* passionate; and we will share *His* nature.

Life More Abundant

The tears that will be wiped from our eyes are those associated with " the former things" of this life, and also the emotion associated with our acceptance. But it can't be that it means we will never have the emotion of sadness ever again. For God is made sad, grieved at His heart, even now. And we are to share *His* nature. Consider for a moment the *emotion* which we will feel after being granted Divine nature. Malachi says we will be like stalled animals, who are fed, fattened, kept in small dark pens to be killed...who then suddenly break out into the daylight, and go prancing away through the meadows. This will be our leap of joy and taste of true freedom. Yet the Father will have to comfort the faithful in the aftermath of the judgment, wiping away the tears which will *then* (see context) be in our eyes, and give us special help to realize that our sinful past has now finally been overcome (Rev. 21:4). " Enter

into the joy of thy Lord!" sounds like the Lord may have to encourage us to get over this stage of weeping, and enter into the sheer joy which He has, that we've finally made it. "*Come...!!* You blessed of my Father! Enter the Kingdom..." sounds like something similar. Now all these things are highly emotional. Yet we will have God's nature. He therefore has just the same capabilities as we will have. And, He exercises them right now.

Real life with such a wonderful God, both in this life and in that to come, will be anything but boring. It is and will be the most wonderful, supreme, dynamic, *ultimate* experience in all of existence; made all the more gripping in that we do not and never will *completely* understand this wonderful God of ours. This is what makes our relationship with Him so compulsive. We see His emotion and passion. We respond to it. We don't understand Him to the end. He leads us to think we do, and then we find how little a portion we have heard of Him. Like Job, we feel He crushes us like a lion, and then shows Himself marvellous unto us in grace. We must be sensitive to His feelings. Those feelings which we see through a glass darkly. And He sees our passions and feelings and is sensitive and responsive to them. He knows us totally, but we do not know Him to the same extent. He leads us on, deeper into Him and His personality and being. And we realize ever more deeply the extent of His knowledge and design of us and our little lives. Words and phrases run out in trying to articulate in words the sheer wonder of our relationship with Him. Particularly is this so with the window all this gives into the passion of Gethsemane, the intensity of the relation between Father and Son there and on Golgotha. Into the tragedy of God at that time. Of those things whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent. Our life with God in Christ is so, so much more than just knowing a set of doctrinal propositions, or turning up at 'church' a few times per week. Lying on a bed dying of cancer, in small town USA to the top floor of a Moscow apartment block, to an African or Indian village...feeling trapped in the routine chores of early motherhood, or in the demands of high pressure employment...for all of us, there is more than excitement with knowing and dealing and at times struggling with this wonderful God of ours. Praise Him, Praise Him, for all that He is, and was, and ever will be to us, for all that we have seen and known of Him, and all that by grace He will yet reveal of Himself. Praise Him, for who He is! For His desire to save us eternally! And seek, with passion and commitment, to please Him whose heart bleeds for us!

Notes

(1) We assume too quickly that the Lord's reference to the Angels carrying Lazarus to the bosom of Abraham means 'straight after his death'. But not necessarily so. He died, was buried, and then at the Lord's return, the Angels will carry the faithful to judgment / the Kingdom- they will go forth and gather the elect. The rich man would only be thrown into Gehenna at the last day, as Jesus so often taught elsewhere. The only element of accommodation to, or parody of, existing Jewish beliefs was in the rich man asking that Lazarus be returned from the dead to warn his brethren. And this element is doubtless inserted into the story by the Lord as a prophecy of how even His resurrection would not convert those who did not truly listen to the Old Testament.

Appendix 3: Separating Church From God

True Christianity is not a purely intellectual, internal faith. It can only be lived in a community. Out of church Christians need to remember this. The lives that we live must be governed by our deep belief, not merely our knowledge, of the first principles of our faith. Those 'first principles' were taught to many of us by members of a church. And yet it can be that our disappointment with the church can lead some to reject the Gospel which the church teaches. I do not believe there is any believer of any experience who has not struggled with this at some time. This arises from a failure to separate the Gospel from the preacher of it; to

see that God and the church are not identical, even though the ecclesias ideally ought to be manifesting God.

The qualities that can so upset us in our community- self-righteousness, hypocrisy, provincialism, parochial attitudes...were the very things which the Gospel records are at such pains to show us the Lord Jesus struggled against in the ecclesia of His day. So we are not alone in our desire to be out of church Christians. In one sense it is possible to say that His struggle with those issues was what led to His death. If we are pained by our struggle- it is in fact a sharing in the sufferings of the Lord. So long as we struggle with them as He struggled, loving the community but hating the human features which are inevitably still in it. And He bore with the ecclesia of His day to the end- right to the cross. And even there, He loved them to the end.

We need to realize that God deals with us as individuals. No matter how functional and holy, or dysfunctional and evil, is our church, we are still treated by the Father as His individual children. So many have struggled with this, tending to see themselves rather as inevitably part of a community, faceless cogs in a machine. And this is actually quite attractive to humanity- hence the popularity of Roman Catholicism. Reflect a while on how God told Gideon: "I will be with thee" [you singular], and yet Gideon responds: "Oh my Lord, if the Lord be with *us*..." (Jud. 6:12,13). Gideon had to be taught that God saw him as a separate, unique individual, and didn't deal with him automatically merely as part of a community as a whole. But it was a slow process. When Gideon saw in a dream a man saying that God had delivered Midian into *his* [singular] hand, Gideon then tells Israel that God had delivered Midian into *their* hands (Jud. 7:14,15). He still found it so hard to believe that God treated *him* as so important to Him.

There is a tremendous tension in our deeply private lives between our Christian ideals and the reality of our daily failures. We'd all surely have to admit this. And yet that tension is inevitably reflected in how our community is. To be shocked or surprised at that lack of congruity within our community merely reflects a lack of penetrating introspection into our own inconsistent, contradictory lives. We shouldn't be surprised at 'hypocrisy'. It's in each of us. It shouldn't be, in the light of the fullness of victory which is promised in Christ, that being "more than conquerors" through Him that loved us in the death of the cross. Men like Gandhi refused to accept Christianity because they could not reconcile the disparity they saw between Christ and Christians. Yet my answer to that would be that there is a disparity within each human being between theory and practice; and no religion or group could ever realistically claim to have no such disparity. Western politicians say that the most vicious and vitriolic letters they receive are from Christians. And I can believe it. And of the 40 or so letters and e-mails I receive daily, the most bitter and vitriolic are not from Catholics, Moslems or atheists- but from my own brethren.

The Lord Jesus didn't set up an institutionalized religion. But He also didn't preach a nebulous network of out of church Christianity. He refused to define a set of external rules. He Himself was in His life the moral law which is binding on His followers. "What would Jesus do?" is the simple and golden law. Religious systems inevitably tend to promote formality and external rules, and this has to some degree happened with our beloved community. Yet the fact this has happened should not obscure for us the wondrous vision of the real, personal Lord Jesus who bids us follow Him, and Him alone.

A personal focus upon the man Christ Jesus ought to lessen the degree to which our faith is focused upon the church, without making us out of church Christians. We need to toughen up, to realize more keenly the self-discipline and self-sacrifice which following the man Jesus requires of us. Paul "exercised" himself in his spiritual life (Acts 24:16), the Greek word *asko* being the source of the English word ascetic. It should not be that our Christianity gives us merely a headful of vital truths but a life unable to fend off sin. We must translate our doctrines into the practice of a transformed life. On-our-knees prayer, fasting, real sacrifice of time, money and human possibilities...this is what the life of Christ is about. This, too, is what forges real personality. Peter speaks of a "hidden man" which is developed within us in Christ. We live in a world and perhaps in a brotherhood where there seems little of this hidden life. Conversation degenerates into mere gossip; those we meet can only talk of what they heard from someone else. The only difference between people seems to be that one has heard some news and the other has not. The inward emptiness of lives is surely reflected in the need to always turn on the radio or TV or CD-player in order to make sure something is happening around us. If we allow ourselves to be sucked into this way of being, then we will so easily focus upon what is negative in others, and our Christian lives become caught up in the community rather than in the Man for whom and in whom the community should have its being.

The Problem Of Truth

The pursuit of 'truth' has led us into many problems, and is partly responsible for the development of the phenomena of out of church Christians. Yes, correct understanding of God's word and will is essential insofar as it affects our practical lives. Yet we seem to have so often forgotten that this is why truth is important- because it issues in the living of a true life before God. We have come to argue over the interpretation of almost every other verse in Scripture, as if eternal life depends upon getting the right interpretation written down in our Bible margins. Dostoevsky wrote a novel, *The Possessed*, in which he describes how a group of committed revolutionaries set out on their search for truth. They believed unity of understanding was essential for success, but they could never draw the limits on what matters they all had to believe uniformly about. The one thing they were all agreed on was that they must all agree. The problem got to such a point that all agreed that so important and high were their aims, that they simply had to kill the one member who would not agree with their view of a certain matter. And so it can be with us. Those who have differing views on non-essentials have been too easily ejected in practice from our community, perhaps in sincerity, but the end result has been the spiritual murder of some of our most vital members.

We have confused unity and uniformity. The wonderful diversity of human persons and thought which there is in God's creation of humankind has so often not been accepted by us. It's like trying to describe a sunset or rainbow through using the technically correct word for every colour we see. We have to instead see the whole to perceive the beauty God intends. Yes, we can define and analyze too much. And yet none of this takes away from the most simple reality of the Gospel: that there *is* a God, there *is* Jesus, and they have given their all that we might come to an eternity of love and grace. And we are to begin living the essence of that eternal existence right now, in reflecting the patient, endless love of God to the unlovely. And in doing this, church and God in that sense come back together again in our own minds, whatever the disappointments.

If we can perceive and correctly explain the separation between church and God, we have something very real and relevant to offer the world around us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke

often of his desire for what he called a religionless Christianity. And this is what we too should be realizing and preaching- Christ without the creeds, without the trappings of mere religion... leading out of church Christians into fellowship with the body of Christ through fully empathizing with where they are coming from.

Appendix 4: The Real Self

The interplay of true psychology and basic Bible truths

4-1 The Real Self

Psychotherapists have powerfully pointed out the difference between the real, essential person- and the personas, or personages, whom we live out in the eyes of others. We humans tend to pretend to be the person others expect of us, we act out the person we feel our society or upbringing demands of us, rather than 'being ourselves'. Truly did Shakespeare write [from a worldly perspective] that all the world's a stage, and we are merely the players / actors. And as Napoleon said, "One becomes the man of one's uniform"; the persona, the act we live, comes to influence the real self, the real person, like the clown who can't stop clowning around offstage. In Biblical terms, we allow the world to push us into its mould, psychologically and sociologically, rather than allowing ourselves to be transformed by the renewing of our minds by the things of God's word and His Son (Rom. 12:2). At baptism, the "new man" was created within us; the man Christ Jesus was formed in us, a new birth occurred, the real, essential Duncan or Dave or Deirdre or Danuta became [potentially at least] 'Jesus Christ', "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). This is how important this matter is. Perceiving the Christ-man within yourself is related to your "hope of glory"; this is the assurance of our future salvation, through which we can have all joy and peace through believing.

The real self, I submit, is related to the man Christ Jesus formed within us at baptism (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 4:19), the "new man" who is born at baptism (Jn. 3:3; Eph. 4:24). This at times coincides with various personas which we all tend to live out in our lives, depending upon whom we are with. At times our real self comes through, we are totally 'ourselves', at others we deny ourselves and act just a persona; and at yet others our 'persona' is influenced by our real self but not totally eclipsed. Thus the high school teacher working in an inner city school needs to come over as tough and hard to her classroom of unstable adolescents. But that 'tough guy' persona is ameliorated by its inter-relation to her true person, the man Christ Jesus within her. This 'new man' is what the Scriptures often refer to as "the heart" or spirit of the believer. God laments that His people are like a silly dove that has no heart, and therefore when they pray to him, it is not from the heart- for they had no heart (Hos. 7:11,14). Those who have not truly intersected their lives with God, who have not experienced true conversion and new creation, have in that sense 'no heart'. The two 'selves' in David are reflected in the way throughout the Psalms, he says things about himself which may appear contradictory- e.g. he protests his innocence and righteousness, and yet elsewhere laments his own sinfulness. One moment he speaks of his own inability to keep God's law; the next, he is cursing those who don't keep that same Law. This wasn't any schizophrenia speaking in David. Rather did he recognize who he saw by imputed righteousness; and yet he recognized who he also was naturally in practice.

The Lord taught His followers “first”, or ‘most of all’, to beware of hypocrisy (Lk. 12:1). For us, all the world is *not* to be a stage, and we are *not* to be merely actors upon that stage. Hypocrisy is that living out of a persona, acting, rather than being the person God created us to be. In the Lord Jesus men saw the word made flesh (Jn. 1:14). There was perfect congruence between the person He presented Himself as, and the person He essentially was. This was why He could so easily touch the true person in others. And I think this is the meaning of the otherwise enigmatic insistence that the Cherubim’s faces, their appearances, and ‘themselves’ were all one (Ez. 10:22). The Russian [Synodal] version translates this: ‘Their view, was who they themselves were’. So often in our encounters with others there is no real dialogue, rather a conflict of monologues. This is why so many a debate between a Christian and a Mormon, e.g., has come to nothing; for perhaps both of them are merely showing one of their personas.

The Lord Jesus alone could say, with full meaning, “I am”. Who He appeared to be, was who He essentially was. He alone achieved a completely integrated, real self. He was what Paul called the “perfect man”, the completed, integrated person (Eph. 4:13). But He had to work on this. Hebrews always speaks of Him as “perfected”, as a verb (Heb. 2:10; 5:9; 7:28)- never with the adjective ‘perfect’. Apart from being a major problem for Trinitarian views, this simple fact sets Him up as *our* pattern, whom the Father seeks like wise ‘to perfect’. Yet the path the Lord had to take to achieve this was hard indeed. Not only did it culminate in the cross, but His growth as a young man is described by the word *prokoptein* (Lk. 2:40,52), defined by Karl Barth [*Church Dogmatics* I 2, p. 158] as meaning ‘to extend by blows, as a smith stretches metal by hammering’. Through childhood crises and the turmoil of adolescence, this is what He went through, to lead Him to the final ‘perfection’ of being able to say “I am”. Because Jesus was always showing His essential self- and this is in some ways an exhausting and almost unbearable way to live- He tended to connect easier to the real selves in His hearers. It may seem strange on first reflection to realize that the peerless Son of God could connect so easily with the hardest of sinners. Whenever we try to be righteous, we often alienate ordinary, sinful people. Yet why, then, did Jesus connect with them by being righteous? Surely because it was somehow so evident that He was not acting out a persona; He was being absolutely Himself, not acting out a part, with no hidden agendas. This was the beauty of His character; just as nature is beautiful because it simply is what it is. So self-evidently, who He was within, was who He showed Himself to be. The more we are ‘ourselves’, the more likely it is that we will connect with our contacts. People who only live out their personas create an impersonal atmosphere around them, whereas the person who lives and shows their real self encourages those around him or her to also feel themselves to be persons. I would go even further and suggest that the more we live as who we are, God Himself will become more personal to us.

To describe or ‘know’ the real self is ultimately impossible; we can’t write down an inventory of who we really are. Paul perceived this when he wrote that now he only knows himself partially, and only in the Kingdom “shall I know, even as also I am known” (1 Cor. 13:12). This for me is one of the Kingdom’s joys; to truly know myself, even as I am presently known by the Father. Until then, we remain mysteries even unto ourselves; and who amongst us has not quietly said that to themselves... The question ‘Who am I?’ must ultimately remain to haunt each one of us until that blessed day. It would be too simplistic to argue that the new man, the real self of the believer, is simply “Jesus Christ”. Our new man is formed in *His image*, but we are each a unique reflection of our Lord. He isn’t seeking to create uniform replicas of Himself; His personality is so multi-faceted that it cannot be replicated in merely one form nor one person. This is why “the body of Christ” is comprised

of so many individuals both over time and space; and it is my belief that when that large community has manifested every aspect of the wonderful person of Jesus Christ, then we will be ripe for His return. This is why the spiritual development of the last generation before the second coming will hasten His return; for once they / we have replicated Himself in ourselves in our various unique ways to a satisfactory extent, then He will return to take us unto Himself, that where He 'was' as He said those words, in terms of His character and person, there we will be (Jn. 14:3; note that read this way, this passage is clearly not talking about Him taking us off to Heaven).

It is what we have been calling 'the real self' which will eternally endure. In this sense, for the faithful, their body may be killed but their soul cannot be (Mt. 10:28). I take this to mean that who they essentially are is for ever recorded by the Lord, and they will be given that same personality at the resurrection. Significantly, the Bible speaks not of the 'resurrection of the body' [it's the creeds which speak of this], but rather "the resurrection of the just", "the resurrection of the dead". The resurrection is more about resurrected characters than resurrected bodies, although the process will involve a new body being given.

Ps. 69:32 RV says simply: "Let your heart live". In our terms, God is saying: 'Be yourself, let your inner man, the heart, come to the fore, and be lived out'. Even if we feel we haven't got there 100% in getting in touch with our real self, one of the joys of the Kingdom is that we shall know [i.e. ourselves] even as we are now known by God (1 Cor. 13:12). We never quite get there in our self understanding in this life- but then, we shall know, even as we are known.

It must be understood that we are not to have two 'selves', as in a 'real self' and a self we project to others- for that is hypocrisy. And yet this doesn't mean that there isn't a difference between two aspects of the human person- the spiritual self and the human being that is seen by men and women. We need to develop the ability to perceive this distinction, to see ourselves from outside of ourselves. In some of the prophetic visions, the prophet saw himself both as a witness to the vision, and also simultaneously as an actor in them- Zechariah in Zech. 3 is a good example. Another would be Ezekiel, who records how he sees a man "which had the inkhorn by his side [who] reported the matter" (Ez. 9:11)- he's seeing himself there in the vision, and reporting it to us. In other words, they had the ability to see themselves from outside of themselves. This is what happened to the Lord Jesus in the wilderness temptations; and seeing ourselves from outside of ourselves is likewise a characteristic of all those who are in close communion with God. We see our real selves as they are in God's sight, and yet we also see ourselves for who we are in real human life. One of the principles of psychotherapy is that the psychotherapist listens to the client and reflects back onto the mind of the client what the client has told them, reframing what the client has said in terms they can relate to and imagine. The idea is that the client is empowered to see themselves from outside of themselves, in a more truthful and real perspective, and thus to view their situation more accurately; the psychotherapist works as a kind of screen onto which the client projects, and then views there what he or she has said. And this is enormously helpful towards the development of a healthy mind and person. The prophets, the Lord Jesus, and all who have found their real self in Christ, are enabled to do something similar.

4-2 The New Life

The new man / person created in us at baptism by the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) is essentially a character; or at least, the potential for a character, after the pattern of the Lord Jesus. For Christ is said to be "formed in us". As we gaze into His glory, we are changed bit by bit into His image. His glorious character is a mirror, Paul says; as we look into it, our image comes to reflect His glory (2 Cor. 3:18). He doesn't subsume us beneath Himself. Self-expression, or even self-manifestation, is one of God's features, and so He intends it to be in us who are made after His image. God manifestation doesn't in that sense mean the destruction or ignoring of the individual human person; rather, the very opposite, in that the real character, the new life, will be eternally developed and preserved. This is where Hinduism is so wrong, as wrong as any monolithic, apostate Papal or Protestant Christianity- the person disappears into the great Whole. Joash understood where 'God manifestation' can be taken too far; he told the Baal worshippers to let Baal plead for himself, rather than them pleading for him (Jud. 6:31). This needs thinking through. He was saying that they were assuming that they had to 'play God' for Baal; they had to mindlessly, unthinkingly manifest the god they thought existed. Joash says that if Baal really exists, he himself will act for himself, openly. And this of course is where the One True God excels; He does act for Himself, and doesn't rely *solely* upon manifesting Himself through men in order to achieve anything. Note the intentional surprise for us in Is. 43:1: "Thus says the Lord that created you... I have redeemed you, I have called you by *your* name; you are Mine". We expect the creator, owner and redeemer of someone or something to name it with *His* name. But God dashes that expectation- He says instead that we are called by *our* name. In this we see the extent to which God has created us so that *we* might have real, personal existence and salvation, not merely to as it were extend Himself. In this we see a profound insight into the utter depth of God's outgiving grace.

Real character and the new life is this world's most pressing need. If all 5 billion of us down here had real character and refused to be led by the manipulations of others, if we knew who we really were and refused to live out merely convenient personas, then the strife and depression and poverty of spirit which characterizes humanity would be no more. Real character refers to who we are when no one's looking; what we essentially feel and identify ourselves as, as we walk down a street alone or lay awake at night in silence. It refers to what our self-talk is about, and the nature of it. I submit that true character of any sort is sadly lacking amongst the billions on this earth. The true and real character is that of the Lord, the true humanity whom God intended. And they know Him not. All are merely living out the expectations of their upbringing or surrounding societies. In Christ alone is the true character as God intends. Only in Him, in bearing His image, is there true freedom of self-determination. This freedom leads to visionary thinking, to true creativity. The peoples of this planet are largely committed to doing as they are told, or to preserving or creating a status quo which operates to their personal advantage; it is in the selfless person of Jesus that we find the freedom to break free from this terribly limited perspective; to creatively serve the only true God, to work out His glory in our own unique ways, not at the dictate of anyone else. Our generation seeks instant everything; instant wealth, success, fulfilling personal relationships, instant gratification. All this reflects a total lack of character. For those who are aware of their real selves, the man Christ Jesus within them, there is the strength to realize that nothing comes instantly; the real self, the new life, is the product of slow, certain development.

There is something unique about the human person, the person God intends us to have; whereas that uniqueness is not found in the personas we often live out. From early childhood, when personality starts to develop, there is the desire to have something unique. Children like

to invent secret codes which erect a sort of barrier between them and their parents; they make secret hiding places, or keep secret treasures to which their parents have no access. Take a real life conversation between two kids:

“I’ve got a secret, but I’m not going to tell you”

“Oh, I don’t care about your silly secret”

“Don’t you want me to tell you my secret?”

“I don’t think *you* could *have* a secret”

“OK, I’ll tell you my secret...”.

Children may be incapable of resisting the pleasure of divulging secrets- even inventing them if necessary. Divulging secrets gives the child, so he thinks, some kind of prestige; he knows something the other doesn’t. And adults are no different. Many lack a sense of their own unique personhood, their boundaries and those of others, to the extent that they will spread gossip no matter how much harm it causes to others.

The Adventure Of Living

The man after God’s image is the new life, the true self of the believer. This means that the new man within us has God’s characteristics. And our Father is essentially creative, pouring out His love in the face of aggression. When we experience those occasional flares of creativity for God, of love, of desire to witness more powerfully, of the energy to truly forgive, our true person is being revealed, albeit in intermittent flashes. The personas we live, on the other hand, tend towards routines, self-centredness, and an altogether narrow vision of life. The man of the flesh is a slave, doing the same things; whereas the man of the spirit is free. Those who merely live out personas thus become automatons, following habits, tending towards stability in everything. Even their spiritual life becomes mere automatisms- Bible reading, breaking bread, attendance at meetings become automated habits rather than events that regularly shock, startle and inspire us as we find authentic contact with the Father and Son through them. The dynamic new life of God is far from the personas we live out. The adventure of living after God’s image becomes suppressed; rather than go out into society and witness for the Gospel and transform lives, a sister prefers to sit at home and read novels or watch movies; a brother plays with his computer programmes or reads Bill Gates’ biography rather than launching out on the internet to lead people world-wide to Christ.

Those random examples reveal something, however. There is a spirit of adventure within us, yet we tend to want to live it out vicariously, through identifying with some character in a movie or in a novel, or reading a travel book, rather than ourselves going outside our comfort zones and being the person God intended us to be in His service. The most timid office clerk will disclose under psychoanalysis that he has dreams which reflect a passion for adventure. Gambling and drug addiction often begin from this basic desire for risk and adventure. The young child seeks an escape from his limited life experience by indulging in fairy tales; adults lose themselves in science fiction and video games. Yet the child seeks true and real adventure; it is only socialization that makes him or her a realist, recognizing the narrow limits of our lives. The young child draws maps of imaginary islands, or she constructs new countries in the sand. The adolescent wants to be different, to have different hair, strange

clothes; there is a hunger to be themselves and not a copy of their parents; to become a person. This spirit of adventure and rebellion and desire for new life is thus a very real, if latent, part of everyone. It can only find true expression in our total devotion to the creative life and spirit of the Lord Jesus. Conversion is therefore a change from a routine of religion to the adventure of a life lived in actual and real fellowship with God Almighty Himself. We are called to the highest levels of personal ambition- that one day, you and I will share God's nature, fighting for the only ultimately right and valid cause, knowing that every move, every choice, every personal decision, is of crucial importance.

We nearly all complain of bursts of fervour for the Lord, willingness to take the leap and adventure of faith, and then slipping back into lukewarmness. What is happening is that the true person is showing through only occasionally, and then we slump back into the personas which society demands of us. Our overorganized society makes us fossilized, and thus we fail to have the sense of rejuvenation, renewal and exaltation of which the Scriptures so frequently speak. Yet such an existence isn't necessarily the fate of every Christian. No. We can, we really can, live a life which is ourselves, fearless of what others think, living the gripping life of true spiritual adventure, taking ourselves where we have never been before, even if it takes us to the cross- which is the ultimate end of the truly Christ-following new life.

Repentance can be understood as those moments when we realize the discordance between our true person and our personage; we fall to our knees in recognition of our hypocrisy, of our unfaithfulness to the Truth of Christ which is really within us, of our acting out a part in the eyes of men. And it is those moments which light afresh the fire for Him which is the basis for all truly spiritual endeavour. The gap between our own person and our personas is easily reflected in the discomfort we feel when we hear a recording of our own voice, a video of our movements, or even a photograph of ourselves. We're all eager to see how we came out in the photo... but that eagerness which turns to a slight discomfort, even to the extent of trying to destroy the photo, is really a sign of the tension which there is between our person and our persona. The two aren't in harmony- and, frankly, never will be until we shall know even as also we are known. And yet when David asks God to "unite my heart", and speaks of praising God with his *whole* heart (Ps. 86:11,12), he surely speaks of his desire not to have two hearts, a real self and a shadow self; but to be one within himself. The new life was to be his one and only life.

The world, Paul told the Romans, seeks to push us into its mould (Rom. 12:2 J.B. Phillips). And this is increasingly true, as people crowded together catch the same bus each day to arrive at roughly the same time, reading the same newspapers, watching the same soap operas... automatic lives. Yet the real self created in the believer is ultimately *free*. For freedom did Christ set us free (Gal. 5:1 RV). The new person, the essential you and me, is characterized by sudden, creative welling up to the Father's glory. This doesn't mean that we have no habits- regular prayer, Bible study, meeting together etc. are all part of the new person.

As I write this my wife and I have just left a meeting in a small bedroom on a Bible School campus in the USA. Stirred by what they had heard in their Bible study classes, three sisters enthused with each other over lunch and decided they must reach out to battered women living in shelters and on the streets. And they invited us along to their planning meeting. There was the very definition of this sudden, creative upwelling. All present shared their own doubts, fears, past abuses and determination to get out of their rut of inactivity and actually

achieve something concrete for their Lord. Their true persons were showing through. They were being themselves. There was no acting, no seeking to impress each other. As an observer, and the only male in the room, not invited to actually participate in the project but just to give some guidance, this was just so apparent to me as I sat there and listened and observed them. They were being themselves; being the women God intended them to be, triumphantly rising above the automatisms of middle class American life to be and live the new life. I recall how the simple words of Jesus were throbbing in my mind as I looked on: “I am...the life” (Jn. 11:25).

This welling up of new life is a characteristic of true conversion. This is why the elderly, the infirm, the chronically shy, experience the flowering of the person, the sense of new life even in the face of the outward man perishing daily; because their inward man, their real self, is being so strongly infused with power (2 Cor. 4:16). This explains why the graph of spiritual growth in any person is not a smooth upward curve; it is a very jagged line. Our true person asserts itself in those moments of totally free choice to serve our Lord. But we so easily allow our lives to slip back into the automatisms which define our personas. Yet the Father and Son are constantly seeking to lead us in “newness of life”. David didn’t get victory by the mulberry trees the same way each time (2 Sam. 5:23,24). God changed the method. To rend apart our personas by true self-examination, to allow the true self to appear, can be shattering. It is nothing short of the way of the cross, the naked self-crucifixion which the Lord asks of us, in which like Him we may look down at all our bones and see them staring back at us (Ps. 22:17). Living like this, we will be constrained to confront life’s problems head on, not content with compromises, escapism, dodging the issues. We will no longer excuse ourselves that we cannot be ourselves for fear of upsetting others. We cannot be true to ourselves and repress our own convictions, or pretending to have those which we do not. James 1:24 brings out the point that real self-examination is related to hearing *and* doing, rather than merely hearing and not doing. Real, adventurous, fearless self-examination, James is saying, leads to action.

Avoiding Stale Relationships

But adventures become stale once they are over. New life is always needed. This is why in our daily reading and fellowship with our Lord, as we enter ever more deeply into His character, we are challenged afresh daily. We aren’t professionals, committee members, in this drive for spirituality. We are amateurs at heart, children, wide eyed with wonder at what we are being shown, ever moving on to some fresh endeavour. Our spiritual new life need never become a mere routine, a burden, a duty to be performed, a habit. For “[in the heart] where the spirit of the Lord [Jesus] is, there the heart is free” (2 Cor. 3:17); we were brought out from the pointless, repetitive bondage of Egypt by the blood of Christ. What this means is not that red liquid somehow did something for us; His example of death, how He was there, inspires us to break out from the vain way of life we received by tradition from our fathers (1 Pet. 1:18). We alone, as true believers in the representative nature of His sacrifice, are thereby empowered to break out of the routine of our lives. Life becomes valuable; we number our days with wisdom (Ps. 90:12). We no longer fear failure, for firstly we know there is forgiveness in Christ, and secondly, our focus is upon living the real life of ultimate discovery and adventure, able to live with the fears which this presents to us. Failure is no longer a problem to us; for the aim is ever before us. We will not be like Ahithophel, committing suicide because he ran out of highway and lost his political power to others (2 Sam. 17:23). Our failures are nothing more than temporary setbacks, as the baby who stretches out her hands to the lamp on the ceiling and cries because she can’t reach it. We

take them all, even our sins, in the spirit of the cross- the supreme failure which became the supreme triumph of God and the true person. Our instinct for security, to hide behind insurance policies and savings, becomes almost despised as we live the life of true seeking after the ideal. Our struggles between the desire for security and the desire to go God's way are no more than the tensions between the persona and the true self. Absolutely no other goals or achievements can ultimately satisfy us- the accumulation of wealth, sexual experience, power, artistic achievement....nothing, nothing, nothing, can ultimately fulfil us, apart from the imitation of Christ Jesus our Lord. Solomon is the great Biblical example, concluding at the end that "Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbour [i.e. his living out of a persona dictated by the society around him]. This also is vanity and a striving after wind" (Ecc. 4:4).

Relationships grow stale because the real self within others remains unperceived. A romance thrives and seems so magic as the two lovers each explore and discover the hidden self of the other, the other's openness to them in turn inspiring them to reveal themselves and be themselves. But so often, this romance ends, and the now married couple retreat into their own worlds, barely communicating. Doing 'romantic' things like going out to eat no longer has meaning. The thrill of discovering each other is over, and frankly, people either look inwards and fill their thinking with the mundane, or they look to someone else. Yet in Christian relationships, the real self within each of us is being renewed day by day. There is so much to discover in each other! Picking through the false self of our mate becomes an enjoyable exercise, as we seek to discover and know who really this wonderful person is whom God is at work upon. Of course, being able to live like this requires us to perceive the value and meaning of persons. And the same theme is apparent on a higher level. All too often, people go through a 'romance period' in coming to know God, eagerly lapping up "the first principles of the oracles of God", they get baptized... and then the same stagnation sets in as so often happens in human relationships. In the church of my youth, much was made of Jn. 17:3: "This is life eternal, to know thee the one true God". It was clearly felt that getting the correct doctrinal facts about God gave a right to life eternal. People learnt those 'facts'- but the whole thing went stale for so many. What the Lord was surely referring to was the fact that eternal life will be spent 'growing to know' [note the aorist tense] the only true God. It will be an endless romance, going on and on and on and further and yet further and deeper, into the infinite and most wonderful Father of ours.

4-3 Self-Perception

The Greek word translated "conscience", *sun-eidesis*, means literally a co-perception. It implies that there are two types of perception within the believer- human perception, and spiritual self perception. The conscience that is cleansed in Christ, that is at peace, will be a conscience that keeps those two perceptions, of the real self and of the persona, in harmony. What we know and perceive humanly, is in harmony with we spiritually perceive. Our conscience, our co-perception, our real self, makes sense of the human perceptions and interprets them in a spiritual way. So, a young man sees an attractive girl. His human perception signals certain things to his brain- to lust, covet, etc. But his co-perception, his conscience, his real self, handles all that, and sees the girl's beauty for just simply what it is- beauty. Job before his 'conversion' paralleled his eye and his ear: "Mine eye hath seen all this, mine ear hath heard and understood it" (Job 13:1). He was so sure that what he heard was what he saw; he was sure that his perceptions were operating correctly. But later, he comes to see a difference between his eye and his ear. He says that he had only heard of God by the ear; but only now, he says, "mine eye seeth thee" (Job 42:5). He had heard words, but,

he realized, he'd not properly 'seen' or perceived. Finally, he had a properly functioning 'conscience', a co-perception. What he saw, was what he really heard.

We have probably all realized that mere introspection isn't necessarily the same as fruitful self-perception / self-examination. In 1 Cor. 11:29,31 we are exhorted to both judge / *diakrino ourselves* and also *diakrino* / discern [s.w.] the body and person of Jesus in His time of dying. This is because our essential person is Him, crucified, covered in blood and spittle. This is why the records of His crucifixion are written so uniquely; supreme above all literature, the inevitable gap between the reader and the person being described [Christ crucified] is miraculously reduced- for the sensitive reader who really makes the effort to believe his or her 'first principle doctrine', that their the Son of God was truly the representative of every one of us in Him. We are to thereby "reckon ourselves" to be dead to sin (Rom. 6:11). The Greek word for "reckon" is that normally translated "impute", in the context of imputing righteousness (Rom. 4:3,4,5,6,8,9- indeed, the word occurs in almost every verse of Romans 4). Strictly the Greek word means "to take an inventory" (Strong). We are to search through our lives and perceive ourselves as in Christ, as men and women who don't sin because we are in Christ. We are to impute [AV "conclude"] that we are justified by faith (Rom. 3:28). The Lord died to justify us (Rom. 4:25); yet we justify ourselves by our attitude to ourselves, in that we allow His death to so influence our self-perception.

We cannot look passively at the cross. It must change how we see ourselves. It must radically affect our self-perception and self understanding. For we are in Him. It was us who hung with Him there, and who hang with Him still in the tribulations of life. For we are to account / impute ourselves as the sheep for the slaughter, i.e. the Lord Jesus, for whose sake we are killed all the day long in the sharing of His sufferings (Rom. 8:36); with Paul, we "die daily", because we are in Christ. And if we suffer with Him, we will also reign with Him (Rom. 8:17; 2 Tim. 2:12). To see ourselves as in Christ, to have such a positive view of ourselves, that the essential 'me' is actually the sinless Son of God, is almost asking too much of men and women living with all the dysfunction and low self-worth that seems part of the human condition.

And so this wonderful word for "impute" occurs again in a wonderful, truly wonderful passage of assurance: "Ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ...not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think [s.w. "impute"] any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency [s.w. "worthiness"] is of God" because our face / image is being changed into His image, "even as by the spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:3,5,18). We look in the mirror, and see Christ in us. This looking in the mirror is used by James as a figure for self-examination (James 1:18,22-25). By doing the word of truth, we find we will live lives of looking in the mirror, of self-perception. This is the essence of self-examination; to perceive the Christ-man within us, and that all other behaviour is our being unfaithful to our true self, living out a persona. We are to see ourselves as being Christ; we are to have a high view of ourselves in this sense, whilst despising and seeking to dismantle the personas we so often act out which are unfaithful to Him. Thus Paul could say that although he was not worthy to be called an apostle, felt himself unworthy to be in Christ even, yet he 'supposed' [s.w. "impute"] that he was one of the "chiefest apostles" (2 Cor. 11:5). No longer would we be victims of jealousies or striving for a higher place in a hierarchy, be it in the ecclesia or in society- for we impute ourselves to be Christ Himself, the highest of all. Now of course there are times when we need to have a persona- the high school teacher needs to come over to his pupils in a certain way in order to have a disciplined classroom. So it's not so much a case of casting off the personage we adopt but rather bringing it into conformity with our true person, Christ in us.

All this is the immense challenge behind Paul's word choice in 1 Cor. 11- that in the light of His cross, in the light of our connection with His life and His death through baptism, we are to use every gram of faith within us to conclude that really and truly, we are Him. And this of course plugs in to the large body of Bible teaching that applies verses which clearly refer to the Lord Jesus personally to us personally. Yet, we do sin. Seriously and grievously. It's not good enough to say that this is merely our personas sinning. We need to change. We are held culpable for those sins. To put it simply, we all want to stop sinning. And how are we to do this? One way is to realize that we are not merely a housewife, a computer programmer, a quiet pensioner hacking and coughing our way through... We are Christ personified to this world. Therefore to be ourselves as God intends is to be Christ, to let the Christ-man within us show forth; the life that He lived and the death that He died becomes ours (Rom. 6:10,11). Paul could say, with reference to this, that he died daily (1 Cor. 15:31); and out of each death, there comes forth new life. For His resurrection life, the type of life that He lived and lives, becomes manifest in our mortal flesh right now (2 Cor. 4:11).

How far we are now in touch with our real selves is crucial to our standing with God. One of the many Proverbs which comment upon this is Prov. 27:21: "As the fining pot for silver, and the furnace for gold, so is a man to his praise". I take this to mean that who we really are is revealed by how we respond to receiving praise. If we know it's valid or reject it as misplaced is the real test of human character. Self knowledge, the ability to self-examine, is indicative of so much.

Internal Hypocrisy

The Lord Jesus perceptively commented that hypocrisy is something which is *within* (Mt. 23:28)- it's about acting out a role *inside* ourselves, a split personality *within* a person, whereby they kid themselves they are someone whom they are not. Their real self and their shadow self are in conflict deep within their minds, in their own self-perceptions they act one way when their real self is something different. And this all goes on *within* the human mind. Hence Paul speaks of hypocrisy being essentially a lie which is told within the mind, and parallels it with a conscience which no longer functions properly (1 Tim. 4:2). The Lord's definition of hypocrisy therefore concerned an internal state of mind- and He warned that this is a yeast which inevitably spreads to others (Lk. 12:1). Thus Barnabas was carried away into hypocrisy by the hypocrisy of others (Gal. 2:13). Although it's so deeply internal, the dissonance between the real self and the portrayed self that goes on *within* human minds somehow becomes a spirit which influences others. And that's how society has become so desperately hypocritical. James 5:12 gives some good practical advice in all this- our yes should mean yes and our no should be no, or else we will fall into hypocrisy (Gk.- AV "condemnation" is a terribly misleading translation). James seems to be saying that we can guard against falling into the hypocritical life and mindset by ensuring that our words, feeling and intentions are directly and simply stated, with meaning to the words, with congruence between our real self and the words we speak.

Relations With Others

Paul plays powerfully upon this idea of the two selves when he appeals to the Galatians "be as I am; for I am as you are" (Gal. 4:12). At first hearing, this seems nonsensical- how can Paul beseech the Galatians to be like him, if he was already like them? Fact is, their behaviour was unlike him; yet he saw their spiritual selves as being like him. And he asks

them to be that spiritual self which he perceived them to have. We likewise need to perceive our difficult brethren as having a spiritual self, which they need to live up to.

Having a true, accurate self-perception and appreciating the tremendous significance of the true person as opposed to our mere personas... this affects our relation to others. We will seek to decode the images presented to us by our brethren, and relate to the Christ-man within them, to the real and true person rather than the persona they act out. Because we see the Christ within them, the real Duncan or Dmitry or Ludmila or Sue or Jorge... we will realize that relationships are worth fighting for. The world of unbelievers then becomes perceived as a mass of persons waiting to be born, to become born again after the image of Christ through their conversion and baptism. The healing of the blind man as recorded in Mk. 8:22-26 is unusual in that the healing was in two stages. Initially the man only "beheld men as trees, walking". As a blind man, he would have had very limited experience of people. He initially saw them merely as part of the landscape, as important to him as trees. But the aim of the miracle was to convict him of this, and lead him to understand people as more than trees, more than just part of the natural creation with as much meaning as trees. That man represented us all; part of coming to the light, of receiving spiritual sight, is to perceive the value and meaning of persons; to see the world of persons rather than a world of things. No longer will we divide people as the world does into winners and losers, successes and failures; rather will we see in each one we meet a potential brother or sister. For they have all been invited into God's family, insofar as we pass them the invitation.

The sheer complexity of human persons means that we cannot ultimately judge them. We see our brother's various personas, sometimes his true, reborn self coming out; and our images of others derive as much from ourselves as from them. It amazes me that we humans succeed in accurately communicating with each other as much as we do. The more one perceives the complexity of the person and the personas whom we meet, the more apparent it is that we cannot claim to be their judge. And the more evident it is that the judgments which human beings constantly make about each other are so superficial and often inevitably false. Further, if we truly believe that we ourselves are in Christ and "impute" His person as being the essence of our real self, then we must likewise impute His righteousness to our brethren. Thus Peter could say that he 'imputed' Silvanus to be a "faithful brother" (1 Pet. 5:12). If only we could consistently live out this truth, then all friction between brethren would be a thing of the past.

The real person isn't a result of automatisms, mere habits; these are the stuff of the persona. Our real self is involved in making radical personal choices in response to God's leading. Thus reading / hearing and believing the Gospel results in our submitting to baptism. We did something concrete; we got wet, we went under water. We made a free and responsible commitment of ourselves. Yet in terms of our relations with others, we must respect their person in the sense that we respect their right for self-determination. What their conscience impels them to do must be accepted by us as a genuine, sincere articulation of their person, even if it isn't what our person impels *us* to do. Thus I must be patient and eagerly acceptant of those whose consciences tell them to, say, clean up their neighbourhood rather than support a Bible preaching campaign. Just as we struggle to break away from mere social conformity, and so often fail, so we must recognize that our brethren likewise face an enormous struggle to be themselves. For example, we may be frustrated at them making what we clearly see to be 'political' decisions, following a certain party line to impress their brethren...but realize that their real, inner self is being submerged in those moments, just as you too so tragically often fail to be true to yourself, and refuse to assume responsibility for

your own convictions and talents. Your own example of making clear choices, doing what is right before God rather than what is wise and smart in human eyes, will reveal a sense of clarity about you which will become inspirational to your brethren. Yours will not be one of those many lives that is paralyzed by constantly postponing the choices, by indecision, like Israel on Carmel, hopping backwards and forwards between two opinions (1 Kings 18:21), between your persona and your true person, which is Christ in you. Ultimately, the choice is not one of principles or doctrines or interpretations; it is between Christ and all the other things which would lead us away from Him. The essential choice is always between “Christ in you” and... her mother, your instincts, their self-perception imposed upon you, your self-interest. And in those choices there is no third road; we are at a T-junction, hour after hour. We chose either life or death (Dt. 30:19); we cannot serve two masters (Mt. 6:24). Insofar as you at least live a life that reflects this recognition, you will be a challenge to those around you.

We have spoken earlier of the adventure of life which is characteristic of the truly free person with an accurate self-perception. Special bonds are forged between those who share adventure together; old soldiers have endless reunions, students reunite to remember their years of intellectual adventure and discovery. Those who bravely live the true life of spiritual adventure, of struggling to show radical love and forgiveness, to even risk their lives and wealth and health for the Lord’s cause, likewise share a supreme fellowship and meeting of minds. The real basis of fellowship is the Lord Jesus Christ. But what does this mean in practice? Surely it is in the fact that the true Christ person within us connects with the true Christ person within our brother or sister. How often have I met with someone who has been open with me, and I have been open with them, and an amazingly close bond of fellowship is formed after only an hours’ dialogue. But then we have both slipped back behind our personas, fearful of being totally open, seeking to impress rather than simply ‘be’ as our Lord has created us- and so the relationship recedes, or even anger develops as we come to perceive elements of hypocrisy in the one we formerly trusted. When we are hurt, our personas often reappear more strongly to cover the hurt done to our person. And so the problem in our inter-personal relationships gets worse.

This is the challenge to us all; to be truly ourselves, with an honest self-perception, so that we can bond as we are intended to with our brethren. Humans so desperately thirst for this real contact, this real authentic fellowship; but they don’t let themselves receive it because they too aren’t transparent. Paradoxically, we often shy away from transparency in the interests of safeguarding harmony. How many marriages have run into the problem of not talking about something because the subject always causes friction and argument! And how many ecclesias have refused to allow open minded discussion of prophetic matters in the interests of unity... This harmony and unity is a fake. It’s as superficial as a couple having sex before they are married, or a marriage in which the real issues are never addressed, it’s the too easy road, which avoids the difficult encounter of persons which there must be to make any relationship authentic. But the real transparency is brave and unafraid, not for ever calculating what to reveal or not reveal. There will never be the authentic fellowship which God intends unless we can rise up to this transparency, with all the initial awkwardness of seeing both ourselves and our brethren standing naked, as it were, before each other.

And yet in another sense, we are never *totally* naked before each other, for we can never fully plumb the depths or complexities of the human person; we can never totally separate the personas from the person, neither in ourselves nor in our observation of others. And the person is dynamic, energized by the things of God’s Spirit, ever developing. When we first

begin a relationship with another person, there is the fascination to explore and know them which often is related to the love we feel for them, in whatever form. Yet here is where many an ecclesia has become dead, many a marriage has grown stale; the partners consider that they know the others' person. But how wrong they are! How little do they appreciate the wonderful complexities and hiddenness of the other! This is why the terms "soul" and "spirit" are so vaguely defined in Scripture; they refer to so many things, and they are the closest equivalent to the term "person" which I have been using in this study. The Son of God spoke of how He knew the Father and was being known by the Father using continuous tenses; He was growing to know the Father, as the Father was growing to know the Son. And so it is within our far more human relationships; fellowship is not something static, a dry theoretical state that exists because we profess allegiance to the same theological tenets. It is a meeting of persons, a coming together in the unity of Christ our Lord. The fellowship we are intended to share in Christ is not merely a sharing of ideas; we are not to view people as simply a pile of flesh and blood who claims to believe various ideas; but rather as real, live persons. To be interested in people as persons rather than as holders of ideas, bearers of party labels etc., means a complete revolution in the thinking of many people. Our Lord surely viewed the mob crying for His blood not as a mob but as people; those who listened to Him likewise were not just an impersonal crowd, or class of pupils, but a collection of persons. His teaching of them was therefore not so much lecturing as a dialogue. And immediately one reflects uncomfortably how our beloved community has focused so much on lecturing and platform speaking; and how we have chosen to combat false points of view rather than first seeking to understand why a person holds that false view.

We must be ourselves as God intended and plans us to be. The focus of Scripture and the Lord Jesus is upon individuals, not upon the building of a faceless and person-less social structure. Notice how often Paul talks of "you" or "ye", and then focuses down to "thee" or "thou"- from the you plural to the you singular. Take Gal. 4:6,7: "Your [plural] hearts...thou [singular] art..."; or "Ye [plural] are all sons of God...thou art...a son" (Gal. 3:26; 4:7 RV). It all comes down to us personally...

Isaac is an example of a man who wouldn't be whom God intended him to be- at least, not all the time. His fear stopped him, and it robbed him of the joy God intended for him. The incident I refer to is when due to his fear, his lack of faith in God's promises, he passes off his wife as his sister when he thinks Abimelech has an interest in her. But Isaac and Rebekah slip off for some intimate time together, and it's noticed that Isaac was "Isaacing ["playing" / "laughing"] himself with Rebekah"- *Yitshaq metsaheq et Ribqah* (Gen. 26:8 Heb.). He was 'being himself' with her, living up to his name, Isaac, which means 'laughter'. It was his fear and lack of faith which had led him to *not* be himself. And we so very often make the same mistake.

4-4 Truth: A Biblical Analysis

The crucial issue in all our reflections so far is that of truth. To be true to our maker, true to our Lord, true to ourselves, true to the new man that was created in us at baptism. We all seek for someone with whom we can be completely honest and vulnerable, who will relate to us with mercy, integrity, confidentiality and loving understanding. Every time we think we have found such a person and they fail us, we are driven further into ourselves. In this lies the sin of gossiping, breaking promised confidences and betrayal; and as a community we need to urgently give a long hard look at ourselves to see if the way we treat each other is leading us closer to the Father and each other, or deeper into ourselves. Because of our repeated bad

experiences with people, we drift so easily into surface-level, false relationships. We talk about safe subjects, not disclosing the really private parts of our hearts. Failures aren't shared, frustrations aren't aired. Hurts are covered up. We sacrifice truth on the altar of peace-keeping and pleasant sociality. And it leads us to the lives of quiet desperation and loneliness-in-the-crowd which so many experience. Yet we in Christ have "the truth". And seek to live it. What does this mean?

"The truth"

The phrase "the truth" is used in Scripture as a summary of the Godly life; for truth telling, and being truthful with oneself and God, is the epitome of the life which God intends. I want to demonstrate this; for all too often it has been assumed that because we know and believe true propositions about the Gospel, therefore we are somehow automatically 'of the truth'. The following passages make clear enough that "the truth" refers not so much to intellectual purity of understanding as to a righteous way of life. If someone understands a matter of Biblical interpretation differently to how we do, e.g. over matters of prophecy, this doesn't mean they have 'left the truth'. Yet if we [e.g.] lie, then we have 'left the truth' despite holding a correct understanding of the doctrines of the Gospel:

- Sinners turn away from truth (2 Tim. 4:4; Tit. 1:14). They are bereft of the truth (1 Tim. 6:5). God has revealed the truth, indeed has sent his Son to live it and to proclaim it, but sinful people have refused to listen.
- English does not have a verb "to truth," but Paul uses such a verb when he urges the Ephesians that " 'truthing' in love" they should grow in Christ in all things (Eph 4:15). We might understand this as "speaking the truth in love," but more probably we should see truth as a quality of action as well as of speech. Paul wants his converts to live the truth as well as to speak it. Real spiritual growth is only possible by a way of life that 'truths it'.
- Paul calls on the Corinthians to keep the feast "with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth," which he contrasts with "malice and evil" (1 Cor. 5:8). Truth is set up against evil- not against wrong interpretations of Bible passages.
- In Ps. 15:2 working righteousness paralleled with speaking the truth in our hearts.
- The opposition between God's truth and our human sin is brought out in Neh. 9:33 RV: "You have dealt truly, but we have done wickedly".
- Ps. 69:13; 117:2 use "truth" to refer to God's mercy and salvation. To shew mercy and salvation to others is to be 'truthful' in the Biblical sense.
- "Truth is perished" is paralleled with Judah being impenitent and not receiving correction (Jer. 7:28).
- To not do God's commands in practice is to have no truth in us (1 Jn. 2:4,5 cp. 3:5). Time and again, the Proverbs speak of truth as the antithesis of various types of sin- e.g. "My mouth shall speak truth... wickedness is an abomination to my lips" (Prov. 8:7; 14:8).
- To commit violence to others' persons is to live a lie (Hos. 12:1). Truth is not therefore merely a set of doctrines; it refers to an obedient life. The LXX uses the phrase 'to do truth',

which John uses, in passages like 2 Chron. 31:20 (about Hezekiah's obedience to commandments), or in Gen. 47:29; Is. 26:10 to describe simply doing and living what is right. The fact truth must be *done* indicates it is *not* merely correct academic interpretation of doctrine.

Jeremiah especially uses "truth" to refer to repentance. In Jer. 5:1 any who "seek the truth" will be forgiven- i.e. seek repentance and forgiveness. This is what truth is about in this sense. It is not simply those who search for correct understanding of Bible verses who will be forgiven. Jer. 7:28 speaks of how "truth is perished" in the context of lamenting how Israel had not responded to the call for repentance. In passing, note that in Jer. 9:3, to be "valiant for the truth" is not to lie and deceive our brethren; it's not referring to being cantankerous with others about their interpretation of Scripture. It's a tragedy that such individuals are held up by some as "valiant for the truth"- but that's just not Jeremiah's context at all. "The knowledge of the truth" in Heb. 10:26 refers in the context to the knowledge of forgiveness and salvation; it's parallel to the "knowledge of salvation" (Lk. 1:77). The "truth" is the ultimate, surpassing reality- that we are saved, by grace, and can look forward to that great salvation being revealed at the last day. As an aside, it seems to me that for all our dysfunction, there's a desire in us to repent, to know the truth and let the truth come out. Psychologically, it's reflected in the way that we all have of telling clumsy lies at times, wanting to be found out as it were... because there's something in us which wants to be truthful, needs to come to confession and repentance. It's why the Catholic church's idea of voluntary sessions of confession is actually popular.

John's greatest joy was that his converts 'walked in truth', they 'walked after [the Father's] commandments' (2 Jn. 4,6). They walked in life honest to themselves and to the Father. Walking or living 'in truth' is thus put for living a life pleasing to God. It surely doesn't mean that we simply live our lives holding on to the same intellectual understanding of doctrines which we had at our baptism. We 'keep' the commandments by 'doing' them (1 Jn. 2:3 cp. 5:2), not by merely holding to a true theoretical definition of them. There is so much more to walking in truth than this. We rightly emphasize the need for true doctrine; but the issue of this in practice is that true doctrine leads to a true life, a life true to God, to our brethren, to ourselves. John parallels walking in the light with walking in the truth (1 Jn. 1:7; 2 Jn. 4); and yet Jn. 3 defines the true light as ultimately the light of the crucified Christ. To live life self-analytically in the shadow of the cross, of Him as He was there, is the only way to walk in truth. This is the true life; to merely hold certain interpretations of Scripture in intellectual purity is not all there is to 'walking in truth' or 'in the light'. This kind of truth sets us free (Jn. 8:31,32). Discerning the correctness of sound exposition will not of itself bring any freedom. But living a life that we know broadly corresponds to the image of the crucified Jesus will give a freedom unknown in any other sphere of human experience.

The commandment to love, as Christ loved us, is made new " as it is made true" (1 Jn. 2:8) both in the person of Jesus, and in all who are truly in Him. This means that the principles we receive in theory are to become 'truth' in us as they were in the Lord; they are to become applied in the very person and fabric of our beings, and not remain merely part of our shadow selves. It is truth that makes us pure (1 Pet. 1:22,23), good deeds are produced by truth (1 Jn. 3:18). No amount of correct theory can make us pure; surely the reference is to the life of transparency to God, of 'truth' in the sense that there is no divide between our inner convictions and our actual lives. Then will come true in us the connection which John perceives between truth and love (1 Jn. 3:19).

The True Life

Yet “the truth” is clearly related to the Gospel. It does, of course, matter crucially what we believe. Paul can speak of “the word of the truth of the gospel” (Col. 1:5) and again of “the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:5). He refers to “the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation” (Eph. 1:13). It’s quite Biblical that we refer to our faith as “the truth”. But truth is clearly a way of describing or summing up the way of life which the doctrines of the truth should elicit in us. Thus “the new man...is created in righteousness and holiness of truth” (Eph. 4:24). We obey the truth in unfeigned love of our brethren (1 Pet. 1:22), not just by intellectual assent at a baptismal interview; we ‘do the truth’ in loving our brother (1 Jn. 1:6); if truth is in us then we walk in it (3 Jn. 3). We are to walk uprightly according to the truth of the Gospel (Gal. 2:14); the truth is an upright walk. The truthfulness of the doctrines we believe is intended to issue in a truthful way of life. Thus Eph. 4:17-21 says that living a vain, greedy life is being disobedient to the truth which is in Jesus. And 2 Thess. 2:12 teaches that to not believe the truth is to take pleasure in unrighteousness. There is a moral link between any falsehood and an unspiritual life. And so repentance is an acknowledgment of the truth (2 Tim. 2:25). A person can learn the theory of God’s truth but never come to acknowledge it- i.e. to repent and live the life of the truth (2 Tim. 3:7), i.e. being transparent before God and brutally honest with oneself. Jer. 5:1 says that “if ye can find a man...that seeketh the truth...I will pardon it”. To seek truth is therefore to repent. Those moments of realization of our sinfulness, of accurately perceiving the gap between the personas we act out and the real, Christ-self within us- in those moments, we have come to truth. And this is the repentance that leads to true, authentic pardon.

It does at times appear impossible to live a truthful life in a world that is so essentially untruthful and self-deceptive. In Greek thought, and especially that of Plato, there was the idea that all on earth was untrue, but there was another, Heavenly world of truth and beauty. John's letters especially bring out that this is a *wrong* view. We, here and now on earth, can live in truth. To “walk in truth” means living a life according to the principles of Jesus, who was *the* truth to us, here in this dirty world of ours. Paul could say that Timothy had fully known his “purpose” (2 Tim. 3:10). The Greek *prothesis* is the same used in the New Testament about the shewbread- the bread openly on display before God. Paul is saying that his essential and real self was transparent, openly shown to both God and man. To say ‘You’ve fully known how open and transparent I am’ is really quite something. Who Paul showed himself to be was who he really was.

Real Self

We must become like a child to enter the Kingdom. I’ve thought a lot about what characteristic is unique to a child- and concluded that it is perhaps simply that a child is natural. Even when others around the child aren’t acting naturally, the child does. He or she dares to show him or herself to others as really is, with no attempt to hide any weakness. This characteristic, the Lord says, is essential if we are to enter the realm of God’s rulership, both now and eternally. We simply have to give priority to ‘being ourselves’.

One thing that works against truthfulness is the neuroses that come from fear, the fearful tensions that arise between our real self and the false self. Fear and truth are opposed. This isn’t merely psychotherapeutic babble. Consider God’s words about this in Is. 57:11: “Of whom hast thou been afraid or feared, that thou has lied, and hast not remembered me?”. The life of brave faith, the life that is lived in the overcoming of fears, the fearless breaking out of

our comfort zones... this is the true life, the life in which we have no need to lie nor believe in lies. But of course it's hard, because we think that the truth, the reality, is what we see around us; whereas faith is believing in what is not seen. Yet actually what is *not* seen is the reality, and what *is* seen is very often a lie. And the true life is a life of faith in those things which are not yet visibly seen.

The Truth Of Christ

The perfect unity within the Lord Jesus, between the person He portrayed and who He really was, is reflected in much New Testament language concerning Him. Thus "life" in 1 Jn. 1:1,2 is personified as Jesus; He was the life (Jn. 11:25; 14:6; 1 Jn. 5:20). The person whom people knew, saw and touched in first century Palestine was the essence of the eternal life, the life God lives, and the life we by grace will eternally live. He wasn't acting human; He was human, genuinely human, and yet that human life which He lived was the ultimate and inner life of the Spirit.

In Jn. 18:37 Jesus told Pilate in the context of His upcoming death that He had come into this world to bear witness to the truth- the cross was the supreme witness and exhibition of the truth. There was no doctrine preached there, but rather the way of life which those doctrines ultimately lead to. Gal. 3:1 remonstrates with the Galatians as to how they could not obey the truth when the crucified Christ had been so clearly displayed to them; clearly Paul saw obedience to the truth as obedience to the implications of the cross. There is a powerful parallel in Gal. 4:16: I am your enemy because I tell you the truth... you are enemies of the cross of Christ. Thus the parallel is made between the cross and the truth. We are sanctified by the truth (Jn. 17:19); but our sanctification is through cleansing in the Lord's blood. The same word is used of our sanctification through that blood (Heb. 9:13; 10:29; 13:12). Perhaps this is why Dan. 8:11,12 seems to describe the altar as "the truth". The cross of Jesus is the ultimate truth. There we see humanity for what we really are; there we see the real effect of sin. Yet above all, there we see the glorious reality of the fact that a Man with our nature overcame sin, and through His sacrifice we really can be forgiven the untruth of all our sin; and thus have a real, concrete, definite hope of the life eternal.

Jesus told the truth to this world in the sense that He was sinless (Jn. 8:47). Likewise in Jn. 17:19 He says that He sanctifies Himself, so that "the truth", i.e. His perfect life and death, might sanctify us. This was His telling of truth to men. By continuing in the word of Jesus we will know the truth (Jn. 8:31,32)- not so much that we will attain greater doctrinal knowledge, but that our lives will reflect our knowledge of Jesus who is "the truth". The truth sets us free; the Son sets us free (Jn. 8:32, 36). "The truth" is therefore a title for Jesus. Mere academic knowledge alone cannot set anyone free from sin; but the living presence and example and spirit of life of another Man can, and does. And so in Jn. 14:6 the way, truth and life are all parallel- truth is a way of life; "truth is in Jesus" (Eph. 4:21 RV). The spirit of life in Christ sets us free from sin (Rom. 8:2); but Gal. 5:1 simply says that "Christ" has set us free [the same Greek phrase] from sin. The Man Christ Jesus is His "spirit of life"; the man and His way of life were in perfect congruence. They always were; for in Him the word was made flesh. There was 'truth' in His very person, in that the principles of the God of Truth were perfectly and totally lived out in His person and being. Back in 1964, Emil Brunner wrote a book, whose title speaks for itself: *Truth As Encounter*. Truth is essentially a person- the Lord Jesus. Truth is an experience, a way of life, a total assurance of forgiveness and salvation, a validation of the new man created within us, in a way so deep, and so strongly felt, that all else appears as falsehood compared to that surpassing 'truth'.

Worship In Spirit And Truth

"But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth: for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers" (Jn. 4:23) was spoken by the Lord early in His ministry. Even at that stage ["and now is..."], there were some worshipping in spirit and in truth. If the Lord is referring to the disciples, and if the "truth" in Jn. 4:24 is to be understood in theological / doctrinal terms, then "the truth" which they at that time possessed was very far less than what we might think today. The disciples at that time had many misbeliefs and misunderstandings; they believed in demons, were unclear about important aspects of the Lord's work, death and resurrection, and believed in ghosts. But they worshipped in spirit and in truth.

However, I suspect that "spirit and in truth" doesn't refer to 'A spiritual attitude PLUS theological purity' (which none of us have anyway). That was how I once read the phrase. But "truth" would seem to me to refer more to truthfulness, and to reality as opposed to shadow- e.g. Jesus as the true light, the true bread refers not to His intellectual purity but to the way in which He was the fulfillment of the things of "the true tabernacle" as Hebrews puts it, and thus His truth / reality stood over against the shadows. In the context, the Lord is making a point to the Samaritan woman about where geographically God's house and place of worship should be- Zion or Gerizim. And as He often does, the Lord takes the question onto another level. 'The place of worship doesn't matter, the worship must be in spirit and in truth', i.e. the presence of God in the temple was to be ended, the Mosaic worship system with its need for geographical place and focus was about to end, and worship was to be internal, in the heart. And some, the Lord noticed, had already perceived that.

So the context of Jn. 4:24 wasn't about the need for doctrinal / theological / intellectual truth. In Jn. 4:18 the Lord commends the woman because she "spoke truthfully / truly" about her marital state. As the Father was seeking "spirit and truth" worshippers, it was apparent to the disciples that the Lord Jesus was "seeking" this woman for God (Jn. 4:27). And so He goes on to encourage her to worship God in spirit and truth[fulness]; her humble recognition of failure was the "truth" required for worship. She had the spirit of David, who worshipped with 'truth in the inward parts' after recognizing his sin with Bathsheba. Notice how David says that God 'desires truth in the inward parts' (Ps. 51:6), and the Lord seems to be alluding to that when He says that God desires worship in spirit [inward parts] and truth. The context of sexual failure is the same for both the Samaritan woman, and David. If my reading of the allusions to David and Ps. 51 is correct, then the Lord wasn't talking at all about "truth" in the sense of pure theology. Rather was He referring to the "truth" of confession of sin and worship with a humble heart. It is the desperately repentant person who will fall down and worship God (Mt. 18:26 s.w.); this is the "spirit and truth" worshipper. And such a spirit is ultimately "the truth" which we are to finally arrive at.

4-5 Self-Talk

So what can all this mean in practice? We all talk to ourselves. There's a steady stream of self-talk going on within us, whether or not we quietly mouth the words to ourselves at times. Some people have a stream of self-talk going on that denigrates their self-worth day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. Others have thoughts of anger and bad imaginations against the evil which they imagine others are doing. Yet others have thoughts of utter vanity, of grandeur, of lust, of various fantasies...and these all influence our words, actions and ambitions in the very end. Prov. 6:22 speaks about self-talk. If God's word abides

within us, “When thou goest, it shall lead thee; when thou sleepest, it shall keep thee; and when thou awakest, it shall talk with thee”. Time and again, God condemns people for walking “in the imagination of their evil heart” (e.g. Jer. 11:8), i.e. living their lives in accordance with their evil self talk, inevitably *doing* the essence of what they had vainly fantasized about.

So many of the Psalms are in fact David’s self-talk, his soliloquys, which merge artlessly and naturally into prayer to God- hence the change of pronouns so often. One moment, he’s speaking to himself; the next, to God. Thus he reflects: “My help comes from the Lord”; and next verse, he goes on to address himself: “He will not suffer your foot to be moved; he that keeps you will not slumber” (Ps. 121:2,3). There’s a Hebrew word, *siyakh*, which means to commune with oneself; it’s a clear reference to what I’m calling ‘self-talk’. David speaks of how he ‘muses’, or talks to himself, about the wonder of God’s natural creation (Ps. 143:5) and His past acts in the history of Israel. We have to ask ourselves whether, for all our familiarity with the Biblical text, these things are actually part of our self-talk? The word occurs in Ps. 55:17, where it’s translated ‘pray’. This self-talk is perhaps the very essence of prayer; this speaking to ourselves is in fact a speaking to God. That’s how we can live the life of continual prayer which busy men like David and Paul claim to have lived. David especially speaks of how he communes with his own heart at night (Ps. 77:6; 119:148 s.w.)- this in particular is the time for self-talk. And hence Prov. 6:22 uses the same word to describe how when we awake, our self-talk will again be of God’s word. When others bad mouthed him, David could say that he spoke to himself about God’s word and works (Ps. 119:23).

When David danced “before / in the eyes of the Lord”, his wife mocked him, because he had embarrassed himself “before / in the eyes of Israel”. David’s response is that he had done this “in my *own* eyes” (2 Sam. 6:20-22). This play on the phrase “before / in the eyes of” is significant. David is highly perceptive here. He’s saying that if this is how he feels in his *own* eyes, then this is how he is before the eyes of God, and therefore this is how he will be before the eyes of Israel and the general public. David is saying: ‘Who I am, my real self, is the one God sees, and I’m not going to hide it from the world; let them see me how I see myself and how God sees me’. In this incident, there was no gap between the ‘real self’ of David and the image he projected to the world. There was complete congruence between how he felt about himself, how God saw him, and how the watching world saw him. And this incident ought to be programmatic for our entire lives.

From the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. So “guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Prov. 4:23). This is why we are told to speak the truth *in our hearts*. David definitely has in mind our self-talk. Our self-talk has a high likelihood of being untrue, fantasy, imagination. Be aware, keenly aware, of the private conversations you’re having with yourself. Ensure that all you are saying to yourself, even if it’s not about spiritual things, is at least truthful. This is where this great theme of truth starts and ends. Ideally, our self-talk should be of Jesus, of the Father, of the things of His Kingdom. Of anything that is just, true, of good report... Yet our self-talk is closely linked to what Scripture would call the devil- the constant fountain of wrong suggestions and unspiritual perspectives that seem to bubble up so constantly within us. The devil- the Biblical one- is “the father of lies” (Jn. 8:44). And untruthfulness seems to begin within our own self-talk. I would even go so far as to almost define the devil as our own self-talk. And it’s likened to a roaring, dangerous lion; a cunning snake. And it’s there within each of us. The control of self-talk is vital. And the Biblical guidance is to make sure it is truthful; for lack of truthfulness is the root of all sin. The

account of the wilderness temptations is in my opinion a wonderful window into the self-talk of the Lord Jesus. He set the example there, of dealing with internal temptation by a self-talk based solidly on the truth of God's word. Sin is normally committed by believers not as an act of conscious rebellion, but rather through a complex process of self-justification; which on repentance we recognize was the mere sophistry of our own self-talk. This is why truthfulness is the epitome of the spiritual life. To deny ever being untruthful is to deny ever sinning. We all have this problem. It's why the assertion of Jesus that He was "the truth" was tantamount to saying that He was sinless. Only thus is He thereby the way to eternal life.

4-6 The Glory Of God

The day of judgment will strip away every false face, every shadow self, from each of us. This is perhaps its main purpose- for it will be for our benefit. God already sees us for who we truly are. Yet there are events in life which are foretastes of the day of judgment, in that they strip away our shadow selves from us, and leave us realizing our nakedness and openness before the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. A sister of many years experience working in a Christian nursing home made the observation that old age and dementia remove the shadow self from people. Some of the elderly believers with whom she worked revealed their essential kindly, Godly selves; yet many others spewed out anger, language and behaviours which appeared so out of character with the people they had shown themselves to be over the decades of church life. Could it not be that they had become expert at portraying their shadow selves to their brethren, whilst the essential self remained unrenewed? In all this lies the crucial importance of true self-examination in this life; for "we make the answer now".

Note that whilst flesh and BLOOD cannot inherit the Kingdom, the risen, immortal Lord Jesus described Himself as flesh and BONES (Lk. 24:39). In fact, we find that "flesh and bones" are often paralleled (Gen. 2:23; Job 10:11; 33:21; Ps. 38:3; Prov. 14:30), and simply mean 'the person', or as the Lord put it on that occasion, "I myself". We ourselves will be in the Kingdom, with similar personalities we have now [that's a very challenging thought of itself]. "Flesh" doesn't necessarily have to refer, in every instance, to something condemned. Who we are now is who we will essentially be in the eternity of God's Kingdom. Let's not allow any idea that somehow our flesh / basic being is so awful that actually, the essential "I myself" will be dissolved beneath the wrath of God at the judgment. The Lord is "the saviour of the body" and will also save our "spirit" at the last day; so that we, albeit with spirit rather than blood energizing us, will live eternally. Understanding things this way enables us to perceive more forcefully the eternal importance of who we develop into as persons, right now.

The continuity of personality between the human Jesus and the now-exalted Jesus is brought out by meditation upon His "glory". The glory of God refers to His essential personality and characteristics. When He 'glorifies Himself', He articulates that personality- e.g. in the condemnation of the wicked or the salvation of His people. The Lord Jesus had that "glory" in what John calls "the beginning", and he says that he and the other disciples witnessed that glory (Jn. 1:14). "The beginning" in John's Gospel often has reference to the beginning of the Lord's ministry. There is essentially only one glory- the glory of the Son is a reflection or manifestation of the glory of the Father. They may be seen as different glories only in the sense that the same glory is reflected from the Lord Jesus in His unique way; as a son reflects or articulates his father's personality, it's not a mirror personality, but it's the same essence. One star differs from another in glory, but they all reflect the same essential light of glory.

The Lord Jesus sought only the glory of the Father (Jn. 7:18). He spoke of the glory of God as being the Son's glory (Jn. 11:4). Thus Isaiah's vision of God's glory is interpreted by John as a prophecy of the Son's glory (Jn. 12:41). The glory of God is His "own self", His own personality and essence. This was with God of course from the ultimate beginning of all, and it was this glory which was manifested in both the death and glorification of the Lord Jesus (Jn. 17:5). The Old Testament title "God of glory" is applied to the Lord Jesus, "the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8; James 2:1). It is *God's* glory which radiates from the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). Jesus is the brightness of God's glory, because He is the express image of God's personality (Heb. 1:3). He received glory from God's glory (2 Pet. 1:17). God is the "Father of glory", the prime source of the one true glory, that is reflected both in the Lord Jesus and in ourselves (Eph. 1:17).

What all this exposition means in practice is this. There is only "one glory" of God. That glory refers to the essential "self", the personality, characteristics, being etc. The Lord Jesus manifested that glory in His mortal life (Jn. 2:11). But He manifests it now that He has been "glorified", and will manifest it in the future day of His glory. And the Lord was as in all things a pattern to us. We are bidden follow in His path to glory. We now in our personalities reflect and manifest the one glory of the Father, and our blessed Hope is glory in the future, to be glorified, to be persons (note that- *to be persons!*) who reflect and 'are' that glory in a more intimate and complete sense than we are now, marred as we are by our human dysfunction, sin, and weakness of will against temptation. We now reflect that glory as in a dirty bronze mirror. The outline of God's glory in the face of Jesus is only dimly reflected in us. But we are being changed, from glory to glory, the focus getting clearer all the time, until that great day when we meet Him and see Him face to face, with all that shall imply and result in. But my point in this context is that there is only one glory. The essence of who we are now in our spiritual man, how we reflect it, in our own unique way, is how we shall always be.

How Unique Is Christadelphianism?

The true Gospel without doubt comprises a series of true doctrines which dovetail beautifully with each other. Getting one aspect wrong tends to throw out the others. For example, if Jesus is God, then Mary is the mother of God, and He must have eternally existed... If Jesus is Son of God and Son of man, then Mary *had to be* an ordinary woman of our nature, and the very fact of His birth requires that He didn't personally pre-exist before His birth. And yet the impression can be given that Christadelphianism is somehow utterly unique, having arrived at conclusions which none others have. In my view, the genius of John Thomas was not so much in that he sat down and worked out the true doctrines from scratch, before an open Bible and concordance as it were... but rather than he had a piercing ability to extract from other belief systems what was true, and disregard the rest. Indeed, if you consider your total knowledge about anything, especially the Gospel, only a small percentage would have been attained from your unaided study. We process information which we receive from others, passing it through filters and our own analysis, hold on to what we think is true and disregard the rest. This is what all human beings do; there is actually very little truly original thought and achievement around, very little is "new under the sun".

I want to briefly show how each aspect of the 'true Gospel' has actually been arrived at by others- even if their conclusions in other areas were suspect.

The unity of God

There is a long history of rejection of the trinity. John Robinson, one time Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, wrote a powerful and widely read book called *The Human Face of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973). In this he ably dismantles the notions of the trinity, the personal pre-existence of the Lord Jesus, and the substitutionary approach to the atonement, speaking rather as we do of representation rather than substitution. And yet this book was written by a famous church leader, and widely acclaimed. And Sir Anthony Buzzard in his numerous and widely acclaimed writings has likewise referenced very many leading church thinkers who have rejected the trinity and pre-existence notions.

Conditional Immortality

There has been a growing body of mainstream Christian writers who have rejected the idea of an immortal soul and hell as a place of fire, seeing it rather as we do- simply the grave. One of the clearest statements is to be found in Oscar Cullman's work *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (London: Epworth Press, 1958). Joachim Jeremias explains how the literal valley of Gehenna came to be misinterpreted as a symbol of a 'hell' that is supposed to be a place of fire: "[Gehenna]...since ancient times has been the name of the valley west and south of Jerusalem...from the woes pronounced by the prophets on the valley (Jer. 7:32 = 19:6; cf. Is. 31:9; 66:24) because sacrifices to Moloch took place there (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6), there developed in the second century BC the idea that the valley of Hinnom would be the place of a fiery hell (Eth. Enoch 26; 90.26)...it is distinguished from *sheol*" (*New Testament Theology*, London: SCM, 1972 p. 129).

The Kingdom of God

The need to be baptized by full immersion is widespread. The fact that this brings us into fellowship with the promises to Abraham is also not unique to our community. Many in the Adventist community, and the various groups that grew out of it, understand this clearly.

That the Kingdom of God will come on earth, after a resurrection and judgment, has likewise been widely accepted amongst many Christian groups. A well known theologian, Joachim Jeremias, has come to the same conclusion as many Christadelphians about the Kingdom of God being 'amongst' us today: "The meaning 'indwelling in' can certainly be excluded. Neither in Judaism nor elsewhere in the New Testament do we find the idea that the reign of God is something indwelling in men, to be found, say, in the heart; such a spiritualistic understanding is ruled out both for Jesus and for the early Christian tradition" (Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1972) p. 101).

The devil and demons

This area of doctrine might appear to be unique to us. But actually there are others who share our beliefs here, and whose work has received wide acclaim. I therefore want to write about this in more detail.

Stephen Mitchell, in a much acclaimed and well publicized book published by none other than Harper Collins, observes that throughout Job, "there is no attempt to deflect ultimate responsibility by blaming a devil or an original sin"⁽¹⁾. And Mitchell says this in the context of commenting upon Job 9:24, where having spoken of the problem of calamity, Job concludes: "Who does it, if not he [God]?" And of course at the end of the book, God confirms Job as having spoken truly about Him. Mitchell observes that Job ends "with a

detailed presentation of two creatures, the Beast and the Serpent... both creatures are, in fact, central figures in ancient near-eastern eschatology, the embodiments of evil that the sky-god battles and conquers... this final section of the Voice from the Whirlwind is a criticism of conventional, dualistic theology. *What is all this foolish chatter about good and evil*, the Voice says, *about battles between a hero-god and some cosmic opponent? Don't you understand that there is no one else in here?* These huge symbols of evil, so terrifying to humans... are presented as God's playthings". And so Mitchell comes to the very same conclusions as we have- there is in the end only God, and He is not in struggle with any super-human 'devil' in Heaven. And according to Mitchell, this is in fact the whole lesson of the book of Job. Even if such a mythical being is thought to exist, as it was in Job's time, the essential point is that God is *so* much greater than such a puny 'devil' that He can play games with him.

Elaine Pagels, a professor at Princeton University, wrote a lengthy book entitled *The Origins of Satan*. This is one of the most widely published statements of agreement with our position on this subject- and it's published by none other than Penguin, and has been widely reviewed and acclaimed. For more information, see [Origins Of Belief In Personal Satan](#). Whilst both Pagels and Mitchell implicitly treat the subject of demons in the same way as we do, it is worth referencing the work of Joachim Jeremias again: "Illnesses of all kinds were attributed to demons, especially the different forms of mental illnesses...we shall understand the extent of this fear of demons better if we note that the absence of enclosed mental hospitals meant that illnesses of this kind came much more before the public eye than they do in our world... There is therefore nothing surprising in the fact that the gospels, too, portray mental illness as being possessed by demons. They speak in the language and conceptuality of their time"⁽²⁾. Commenting on the 'satan' of Job and Zechariah, the respected *Anchor Bible* notes: "Neither in Job nor in Zechariah is the Accuser an independent entity with real power, except that which Yahweh consents to give him" (3). A.L. Oppenheim carefully studied how the figure of a personal satan entered into Hebrew thought; he concludes that it was *originally absent*. He considers that their view of a Divine court, or council, such as is hinted at in the Hebrew Bible, was significant for them; but they noted that in some Mesopotamian bureaucracies there was a similar understanding, but always there was an "accuser" present, a 'satan' figure (4). And the Jews adopted this idea and thus came to believe in a personal satan.

Conclusions

Note the publishers of the referenced sources. These are all major publishing houses, the books are sold in standard bookstores, have received critical acclaim, and the authors aren't eccentric nobodies. They are well known names in the Christian and theological world. Firstly, take some encouragement in the matter of preaching the truth. It's easy to get the impression that people just aren't interested in our understanding of doctrine because they think it's freaky and too obtuse or unusual to be true. This isn't actually the case. There are a lot of people out there who *are* interested in what we have to say, and are willing to listen approvingly to it. Because major publishing houses don't touch crackpot ideas that nobody is interested in. And major journals don't positively review extremist and 'out there' publications. There *is* interest in what we have to say. The issue is, how we say it. If we present it merely as the position statement of a denomination, nobody will give us much airtime nor attention. This world is tired of being preached at by denominations hungry for adherents. But let them meet real people, sharing their understanding of vital and life-changing truths as the basis for the radical transformation of human life in practice... and they're interested. The large numbers of baptisms in recent years resulting from such an

approach, as taken by Christadelphian agencies such as the BBFU, CCM and others, is proof enough of this.

In what, then, lies the uniqueness of the Christadelphian faith? It's not that we nor our 19th century spiritual ancestors figured out doctrines from scratch. Rather, we have achieved a unique synthesis, using an eclectic approach which unashamedly borrows from the conclusions of others, and put it together in way which I believe is solidly reflective of the 1st century Christian system of doctrinal belief. This should teach us some humility; it's not that we *alone* 'have the truths' about things like the Godhead, death state, devil etc. It's not that we figured all this out from scratch by our unaided study. By grace we have seen how best to fit the pieces of the Gospel puzzle together. Preaching, in my experience, is largely a question of getting people to make connections, to put what they already know into the right context, and add some extra pieces to their picture to complete it. So many people will say 'Well, I've always believed that it's me not the devil responsible for my sins... I've always doubted that Jesus could have existed as a person before His birth...'.

We in the 21st century- at least in Europe, much of Africa, the Americas and Australasia- are not preaching to people with a blank slate so far as Christianity goes. People have some ideas, some doubts, some pieces of a picture. If we give the impression that they know nothing and we know everything- and many approaches to our communal witnessing seem to imply that- then this will be a big turn off for many people. They want to see themselves validated as people who know at least something about spiritual matters; they want to see their yearning to know more genuinely recognized in an appropriate and respectful way. Given the right approach, the Christadelphian understanding of the Gospel could make great inroads into even Western society. The ground is so ripe; but success all depends upon our having the right and prayerful approach.

Notes

(1) Stephen Mitchell, *The Book Of Job* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

(2) Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1972) p. 93.

(3) C.L. Meyers and E.M. Meyers, *The Anchor Bible: Haggai, Zechariah 1-8* (New York: Doubleday, 2004 ed.) p. 184.

(4) A.L. Oppenheim, "The eyes of the Lord", *Journal of The American Oriental Society* Vol. 88 (1968) pp. 173-180.